

Policy pointers

There is a growing policy consensus that cash remittances can be mainstreamed into development planning. But a new research agenda and policy dialogue are also urgently required relating to food remittances and urban and rural food security.

Food remitting is a major research gap that demands much greater attention and a systematic, comparative programme of primary research.

The case studies from Zimbabwe and Namibia in this report highlight how a deeper understanding of food remitting can be applied in other African contexts: the nature of rural-urban linkages under conditions of state failure and crisis (Zimbabwe) and the importance of reciprocal cash and food remittances for food security (Namibia).

Food remitting cannot be treated in isolation from the complex web of relations and connections between both rural and urban contexts. An extremely useful starting point is to explore how stretched or multi-nodal households drive and impact on food remitting at both urban and rural ends of the spectrum

Why food remittances matter: rural-urban linkages and food security in Africa

The transfer of funds by migrants to their home countries (cash remittances) is at an all-time high. By 2017, it is predicted to rise to US\$500 billion – and there is a growing policy consensus that cash remittances can be mainstreamed into development. Equally, food remitting also has a role to play in urban and rural food security. Yet despite its importance, researchers and policymakers tend to ignore food remitting.

This briefing is aimed at researchers and policymakers interested in transforming rural-urban linkages and the implications for food security of rural and urban residents. The current rural-urban binary is arbitrary, outdated and unhelpful. At a time of rapid urbanisation in the global South, a wider lens is needed: focusing on rural-urban linkages and moving beyond cash-based, market transactions to consider the bidirectional flows of goods – including food – and their impact on food security. Using case studies from Zimbabwe and Namibia, this report demonstrates how lessons related to food remitting can be applied in other African contexts – and highlights the urgent need for a new research agenda.

Why focus on food remittances?

The growing literature on rural-urban linkages highlights their complex, dynamic nature in the context of rapid urbanisation and growing rural-urban migration in Africa. Food remitting cannot be treated in isolation from the 'complex web of relations and connections incorporating rural and urban dimensions and all that is in between'.¹ Yet the remitting of goods, and especially foodstuffs, across international boundaries and within countries has received little attention, particularly

in Africa, where it seems that 'transfers of food are invisible in the sense that they run within the family and outside market channels'.²

A recent study contributes to the exploration of changing rural-urban linkages by expanding the geographic and thematic scope of research.³ It demonstrates the value of examining the links between informal food transfers and urban-based household food security and argues for a new research and policy agenda focused on food remitting. The study uncovers

the knowledge gaps relating to rural-urban linkages, food remittances and food security in Africa. It examines the impacts of cross-border migration and remittances on food security and food remittances in relation to internal migration – and how urban migrant households often rely on informal food supplies from their rural counterparts. What are the differences between rural-urban and urban-urban food remittances, and what is the significance of food remitting between urban areas? Why are there differences in the frequency and types of food remittances and food remitting? How does food remitting vary in rural areas? How is it influenced by rural household income and what are the impacts on poorer households? How do food remittances symbolise the continuity and strength of family ties?

Recent case studies from Zimbabwe and Namibia also demonstrate how lessons related to food remitting can be applied in other African contexts – and highlight why a new research agenda is needed (see Box 1).

Box 1. Lessons from the Zimbabwe and Namibia case studies

A recent case study of Harare in Zimbabwe looks at food remittances under conditions of extreme economic and political duress.³ Another focuses on Windhoek in Namibia, and demonstrates the importance of cash remittances for food remittances reciprocity.

These case studies highlight different facets of food remitting with potentially broader applicability. Many African countries are no strangers to economic crisis, civil strife and, in some cases, state failure. The significance of food remitting to the urban poor in a state in crisis is amply demonstrated by the Harare case. In addition, it allows an assessment of the impact of macro-economic and political stability on food remitting. It shows that without significant improvement in employment levels, incomes and the cost of food, the amelioration of a crisis, in itself, will have only a marginal impact on the significance of food remitting.

The Windhoek case study provides an important example of cash remittances for food remittances reciprocity. It also raises important hypotheses about food remittances that need further elaboration and testing. What is the relationship between urban poverty and the level of food remitting? Do food remittances substantially reduce levels of urban food insecurity? Is the volume and frequency of food remitting related to the strength of links between urban and rural residents? Why is there inter-household variation in levels of food security and food receipts within the same geographical area of the city? Why do female-centred households appear to be more vulnerable despite the lack of evidence for gender discrimination in food remitting? And do reciprocal remitting patterns change over time with increased migration and urbanisation?

What are the main lessons?

Rural-urban linkages in a rapidly urbanising world require much more attention from researchers and policymakers. Several key findings have emerged from the existing literature on food remitting.³

The importance of bidirectional food remittances. There have been no large-scale systematic studies that look simultaneously at the rural and the urban nodes of a household. Most studies overlook food remitting as a key link between rural and urban areas and food security. Understanding these linkages must move beyond cash-based, market transactions to consider bidirectional flows of goods, including foodstuffs, and their impact on food security. Concepts of the divided or stretched household⁴ and multi-local household livelihoods² should guide any analysis of the dynamics of food remitting. There is also considerable spatial variability in the volumes, frequency and types of foodstuffs that flow to towns and cities, and more research is needed to discover why.

Cross-border migration and food remittances. Food remitting is an important livelihood strategy. Remittances across international boundaries are important to food security⁵ and there is a massive informal trade in food in Africa. Goods remitting – particularly clothing and food – are significant within the Southern African Development Community (SADC).⁶ International migrants are more likely to remit both cash (60 per cent) and food (30 per cent) than internal migrants (38 per cent cash and 6 per cent food).

Internal migration and food remittances. Reciprocal rural-urban-rural remitting is ‘fundamental to the ability of poor urban households to survive’.⁷ Many urban migrant households rely on informal, non-marketed food from rural counterparts. In Kenya, there is evidence of extensive reciprocal remitting of cash, clothing, building materials and agricultural equipment from town to countryside and foodstuffs – such as green maize and local vegetables – from countryside to town.^{8,9} But although we know a reasonable amount about the importance of food remitting to urban food security, we know little about what it means for rural food security in terms both of food sent and received. More research is needed.

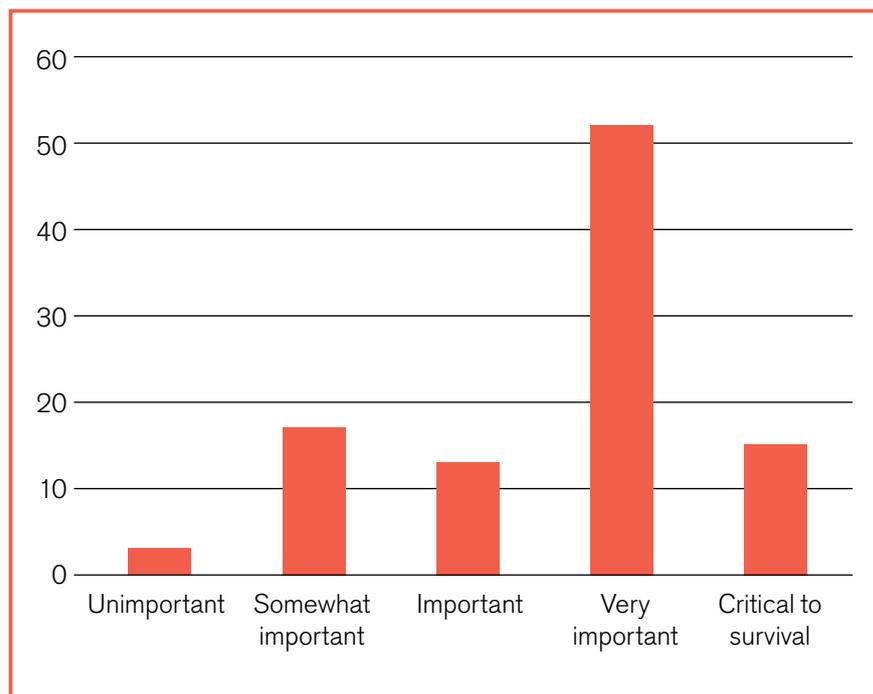
Comparing rural-urban and urban-urban food remittances.

For food-insecure households, food remittances from both rural and urban sources are important. In 2008–9, a survey by the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) found that around a third of poor urban households had received food remittances from relatives or friends outside the city the year before.¹⁰ Households receiving food remittances from rural areas emphasised that they are important for household survival (see eg Figure 1). But interestingly, while rural-urban food remitting was significant, urban-urban food remitting was greater still. This phenomenon suggests that we need a much more nuanced notion of linkages and flows. Clearly, rural-urban linkages are not the only important influence on urban food security. We should not ignore the fact that there are also other significant dimensions of food remitting that are relatively unexplored, including rural-rural and urban-urban remitting.

Frequency and types of food remitting. The AFSUN study also showed that households receiving food from another urban area did so far more often. This might suggest that urban-urban networks and support mechanisms are stronger than rural-urban ties. Transportation is easier and food transfers are less likely to be affected by agricultural seasons. In addition, rural-urban food remittances tend to be home produced while urban-urban foods are purchased and include more variety, enhancing dietary diversity. What impact this has on the food security of producers and purchasers requires additional research.

Food remitters in rural areas. The evidence suggests that rural-urban food remitting tends to focus more on poor urban neighbourhoods and households than middle- and upper-income areas and is important to bolstering their food security. On the other hand, there is some evidence that better-off rural households remit more than their less well-off counterparts. A study by Sweden's Lund University in 2008

Figure 1. Self-assessment of importance of food remittances in Windhoek¹⁰



shows the complexity of the geography of remitting.^{2,11} It provides evidence of rural-rural food remitting between households and suggests that rural-urban food remittances also vary with the proximity and size of the destination. It suggests that as household income increases, so does the propensity to remit food – but also that the effects of food remitting are much more severe on poorer households. Food remittances can be seen as an important form of 'social security' for vulnerable households.¹¹ But food remitting is not just about food security. It also has an important cultural dimension as food remittances symbolise the continuity and strength of kin relationships.¹²

Food remitting is an important livelihood strategy. Remittances across international boundaries are important to food security and there is a massive informal trade in food in Africa.

What are the main recommendations for researchers and policymakers?

The massive global attention paid to cash remittances over the past decade provides a solid evidence base for policymaking and advocacy at the international, regional and national levels. Policy prescriptions for maximising the flow and impacts of cash remittances on development are now legion and part of a growing policy consensus that remittances can be mainstreamed into development planning and the practices of the private sector, for the benefit of both senders and recipients, whether individuals, communities or whole countries. Yet no equivalent knowledge base or policy dialogue exists with regard to food remittances.

- A new research agenda and policy dialogue are urgently required relating to food remittances and urban and rural food security. Food remitting is a major research gap that demands much greater attention and a systematic, comparative programme of primary research.
- The recent case studies from Zimbabwe and Namibia highlight how a deeper understanding of food remitting can be applied in other African contexts: the nature of rural-urban linkages under conditions of state failure

and crisis (Zimbabwe) and the importance of reciprocal cash and food remittances for food security (Namibia).

- The notion of a rural-urban divide is outdated and oversimplifies the issues. Food remitting cannot be treated in isolation from the complex web of relations and connections between both rural and urban contexts. An extremely useful starting point is to explore how stretched or multi-nodal households drive and impact on food remitting at both urban and rural ends of the spectrum.

Much additional research on this important, yet much-neglected, aspect of rural-urban linkages and informal cross-border transactions is urgently required. By drawing attention to the importance of food remittances for urban and rural food security and identifying the current knowledge gaps, the recent report³ on which this briefing paper is based creates a platform for the design of a new research agenda.

About the authors

Jonathan Crush is chair of global migration at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and development at the Balsillie School of International Affairs (BSIA), Waterloo, Canada and director of the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) (www.afsun.org) and the Hungry Cities Partnership (www.hungrycities.net).

Mary Caesar is a post-doctoral fellow at BSIA.

Urbanisation, rural-urban transformations and food systems

This policy brief is part of the IFAD-funded project Rural-Urban Transformations and Food Systems: Re-Framing Food Security Narratives and Identifying Policy Options That Foster Sustainable Transitions. Global food security and rural development are often framed in terms of inadequate agricultural production. But urbanisation is driving profound transformations in food systems in rural, peri-urban and urban areas – from food consumption to food processing, transport, markets and all related activities. Local, national, regional and global policies are critical to shaping rural-urban linkages and the political economy of food systems. Policies must support food security and livelihoods of low-income groups in all locations – while fostering sustainable rural-urban transitions.

IIED is convening and supporting a global network of researchers and practitioners in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and China. These include local government officials, civil society organisations and regional research institutions, both urban and rural. Network members are also engaging with international agencies such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Habitat, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). For a full list of project policy briefs and working papers, see: www.iied.org/urbanisation-rural-urban-transformations-food-systems

Notes

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- ⁴ Francis, E (2000) *Making a living: changing livelihoods in rural Africa*. Routledge, London.
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- ¹² Kuire, V *et al.* (2013) 'Abandoning' farms in search of food: food remittance and household food security in Ghana. *African Geographical Review* 32: 125–139.



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Contact

Jonathan Crush
jcrush@balsillieschool.ca
 Cecilia Tacoli
cecilia.tacoli@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

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