

Policy pointers

Policy is largely informed by production-led narratives on food security, neglecting the rise of rural net food buyers and increasing food insecurity of many urban dwellers.

Reframing the debate around consumption will help in identifying and acting on the huge constraints that low-income groups face in accessing food, acknowledging the crucial role of trade and informal food provision.

Urbanisation, including the growth of small towns and governance systems that span urban and rural contexts, must be recognised as an increasingly important factor in rural transformations and food security.

Our change initiative is bringing together practitioners, grassroots organisations and academics to develop and share knowledge and experience. This 'co-production' of knowledge is the first step towards informing global narratives on food security and making effective policy.

Reframing the debate on urbanisation, rural transformation and food security

More than half the world's population live in urban areas. Growing numbers of people in rural areas buy more food than they sell. Our food security narratives are outdated: urban dwellers are not all 'over consumers'; rural communities are not exclusively producers. For effective policymaking, the production-based debate on food security must adapt to consider how consumption and urbanisation are transforming rural spaces and economies, food systems and food security. It must focus on access, affordability, safety and nutrition for both rural and urban low-income groups. Policy can be informed by innovations in trade networks and governance systems that span urban and rural contexts. We are working with partners in Africa and Asia on an ambitious change initiative that will support an evidence-based shift in global food security narratives.

Contemporary narratives on food security fall into two main categories. Both are partly right and partly wrong.

The first category frames rural areas as sites of unsustainable under-production. It calls for a revolution in smallholder agriculture through access to credit, inputs and markets, better links with agribusiness, and more and better public-private partnerships. But this picture largely ignores the growing number of rural people buying more food than they sell. These net food buyers are typically from low-income groups who rely on access to affordable food and the cash to purchase it.

The second category paints urban areas as sites of unsustainable over-consumption, due to the dietary transformations associated with urbanisation, and as unsafe, being home to informal food processing and vending. It calls for a modernised and formalised food trade to meet consumer needs. This narrative overlooks the growing inequalities within urban populations,

where chronic child malnutrition in low-income settlements can be as high or higher than in rural areas and often coexists with growing obesity rates. It also fails to consider the essential role played by informal markets and street vendors in enabling low-income consumers to access affordable food.

The traditional dichotomy of 'rural producers/urban consumers' is increasingly inaccurate. We need narratives that can ground debate and action on food security in the evolving challenges faced by both rural and urban low-income consumers. A better understanding of the complex dynamics of rural-urban transitions is necessary to shape this. In an urbanising world, demand from cities and small towns will become an increasingly important driver of rural transformations. But rather than connect urban settlements with agriculture in surrounding regions, these transitions may instead rely on global food chains and processed foods to feed urban and, increasingly, rural consumers.

Small towns are engines of urbanisation outside the large cities

Inclusive new narratives

By focusing on production, policymaking narratives often neglect factors that shape and restrict access to food for low-income groups. The favoured 'food systems' approach (which looks at production and its outcomes, all the way from farm to fork) includes post-production activity such as processing and distribution. However, in most cases, policies that touch on access to markets are focused on access to value chains for smallholders and other producers, failing to consider access to affordable food for low-income urban and rural consumers.

Narratives favouring consumption as a key entry point to understanding food systems have several advantages, being:

More inclusive. Consumption is universal — in most cases food producers are also food purchasers, and many smallholder households are net food buyers.

Broader in scope. The factors that shape consumption include but are not limited to access and affordability: living space, time constraints, infrastructure, culture and preferences (including perceptions of safety) all contribute.

Able to reflect complexity. Consumption patterns, even within a single rural or urban

settlement, are often diverse. But there is very little information organised by wealth, location, gender, migrant status and other key factors that could help us identify and act on specific challenges and opportunities faced by different groups of consumers, including increasing levels of obesity coexisting with malnutrition among low-income groups.

A link to relevant policy. Policies at global and national levels (for example, trade policy) or at local level (for example, planning and location of formal and informal food markets) have profound impacts on consumption, which in turn affect production. Urban markets can be important drivers of agricultural production and innovation, or can be channels for imports that displace national and local production.

A wider lens. Including policies that affect consumption but are not explicitly related to food in our thinking allows us to see a more complete picture. For example, rural income-generating opportunities outside of farming (including migration) can be just as important to the food security of low-income and land-poor groups. This income is also often the main source of investment for smallholder households in agricultural production.

Looking again at food, urbanisation and low-income groups

It is widely agreed that urbanisation plays a critical role in food security: the concentration of consumers requires fundamental changes in food systems. But if we look through the lens of consumption, we see our thinking on urbanisation may not be fit for purpose.

In production-focused narratives, urban residents are a homogenous group whose increase in consumption and changes in diet are having a major impact on natural resources. But the evidence suggests that growing incomes, rather than urbanisation itself, are driving dietary changes. Urban consumers with disposable income are exercising choice and are increasingly influenced by global players such as supermarkets and large-scale actors in value chains, who drive perceptions about what constitutes 'safe food' among other things.

Effective food policy must embrace urban diversity. How well does current thinking include consumers on low incomes, who largely cannot afford food from 'modern' outlets? While prices can prevent access to supermarkets for poorer families, more important barriers may be location, time and space (see Box 1). Those on low incomes turn to 'informal' markets — encompassing small-scale producers to traders

Box 1. Appreciating street food

Current narratives often have street vendors pegged as a problem in low- and middle-income countries, serving potentially unsafe and unhealthy food and bucking the expected evolution to modernity and formal markets. But street vendors have not been swept aside by a 'supermarket revolution', and from small towns to big cities, food from informal markets remains a staple for many low-income residents, meeting their needs in terms of:

Price. Although food is largely cheaper if bought unprepared and/or in bulk, peaks in the cost of cooking fuel may offset savings.

Space. Overcrowding hinders storing and preparing food at home, exacerbated by limited access to water and refrigeration.

Time. Women in many low-income households remain responsible for food preparation as well as doing paid work. Buying ready-to-eat food saves time.

Location. Informal markets and vendors set up where need is greatest, catering to those working long hours or in areas remote from formal suppliers.

We still need to understand more about where the food sold by street vendors comes from, and explore whether growing urban consumption of street food is compromising links to local agriculture. For example, in Fort Portal, an intermediate urban centre in Uganda, low-income groups such as students depend on informal vendors for cheap high-energy food such as chapatti. But this food does not necessarily come from the region's smallholders or even Uganda: chapatti flour is imported from Tanzania.

and street vendors of prepared food — but how well is their role understood? There has been growing interest in informal food markets in recent years, but how far has this translated into national and local policies that support and improve them, including the safety of food sold?

Consumption-focused narratives pose many questions, but we already have some of the information we need to answer them. There is a growing body of knowledge about how low-income urban groups secure access to food and why, in many cases, they are best described as 'food insecure'. Work by the African Food Security Urban Network¹ shows that a staggering proportion of low income households in Southern African cities are food insecure, in some cases over 80 per cent. Africa Population and Health Research Centre's² studies in Nairobi's informal settlements show that around half of the residents are food insecure. Perhaps even more disturbing is their finding that poor food quality has resulted in 42 per cent of households being home to both obese adults and chronically malnourished children.³

There are also emerging innovative actions. These range from community-led mapping to associations of food traders and vendors, with the former carried out by federations of the urban poor and documented by Shack/Slum Dwellers International and the latter including organisations like Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing. The co-production of knowledge by practitioners, grassroots organisations and academics is the first step towards the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies. But there is a need to consolidate and disseminate our knowledge and experience, from the city streets to regional level, and on to inform global narratives.

A new take on rural-urban transformations

Food security debates too often assume that consumption is primarily an urban issue. In reality, many rural residents are net food buyers, placing as much importance on cash incomes and accessing food markets as urban residents. In West Africa, CIRAD⁴ research shows that rural residents buy half of all imported and domestic rice. In Vietnam — the second largest exporter of rice in the world — more than half of the rural population are net rice buyers.⁵ Policymakers using consumption-based narratives can better respond to a changing rural economy, including consideration of the opportunities for non-farm employment, which are increasingly important to rural development.

Box 2. The increasing importance of small towns

Small towns are transformative, able to build on a region's agricultural base to diversify the local economy and increase its share of services and industry. They epitomise the limitations of assuming that rural producers sell to urban consumers in simple 'A to B' transactions.

Production still plays a key part in small urbanised centres, as well-networked local traders dispatch produce to different markets, based on demand. Traders can buy and sell a whole harvest — lower-grade produce bound for rural markets, high-grade for urban or even international markets.

This creates a virtuous circle of development: the associated grading, processing and transport activities provide income-generating opportunities for local residents and migrants, who in turn create demand for services and manufactured goods that create new employment, and contribute to the diversification of the local economic base.

The idea that 'urban' considerations are only applicable to cities is another false assumption. It ignores the crucial role that small urban centres — emerging urban spaces in rural areas — can play in the 'virtuous circle' of rural-urban development, and in both the production and consumption dimensions of food security (see Box 2). Although this role has long been recognised as central to rural development, small towns remain largely absent from national and local policies. Where they are included, there seems a limited understanding of the factors that make small urban centres a successful engine of local development.

Current narratives on food security have given rise to policies for increasing food production that can all too easily be translated into large-scale mechanised farming in rural areas. Rural-urban linkages are seen as linear connections from producer to consumer. But a consumption perspective can reflect the complexity of the connections, and reveal the processes of local transformation and balanced urbanisation that we need to address the multiple dimensions of food insecurity: production and consumption, rural and urban.

To enable effective policy decisions we must keep documenting the scale and nature of rural transformations and the role of small urban centres. Again the first step is to bring practitioners, grassroots organisations and academics together to co-produce knowledge that can enlighten local policies to support virtuous circles of rural-urban development. We also need to consolidate and share existing knowledge to inform global narratives on food security and rural development, and help move the terms of the debate from 'urban/rural, producer/consumer' to a more nuanced and grounded understanding.

Supporting global change

We aim to engage with and influence prevailing policy narratives on food security through our change initiative, launched in December 2014.⁶ We will build on our long-term partnerships with practitioners, researchers and grassroots organisations in both urban and rural contexts, coming together to generate and share knowledge and advocacy.

The initiative links work on urban food security funded by the UK Department for International Development, a new partnership with the International Fund for Agricultural Development on 'Rural-Urban Transformations and Food Systems', and a 'Change Lab' with Hivos on 'Sustainable Food for All'.

Through it, we will support change on two inter-related levels:

Globally we will

- Convene a network of researchers and practitioners who can develop insights into the processes, politics and instruments behind successful innovations and alternative policy solutions for equitable consumption
- Create spaces for debate, innovation and practical engagement to challenge assumptions, based on evidence and explicitly addressing issues of power and inequality
- Contribute to current policy debates at national and global levels — on the further evolution of the post-2015 development agenda and SDGs, preparations for Habitat III, and wider discussions on global food security and climate change, sustainable urbanisation and rural transformations.

On the ground we will work with partner organisations that are in the thick of urban and rural transformations. Through action research, capacity building and advocacy, we will collectively help to build food systems that give low-income and vulnerable groups access to safe, nutritious, affordable and sustainable food.

Progress and priorities

The change initiative's international network of researchers and practitioners met in late 2014 to exchange and consolidate existing knowledge, identify the major gaps that need to be addressed, and agree six priorities to be explored in the next 18 months:

Notes

¹ www.afsun.org / ² www.aphr.org / ³ Kimani-Murage et al., APHRC. Unpublished data. / ⁴ www.cirad.fr / ⁵ Thanh, HX et al. Food security in the context of Vietnam's rural-urban linkages and climate change. IIED. <http://pubs.iied.org/10649IIED> / ⁶ IIED's vision for four high-profile change initiatives is detailed in our 2014-19 strategy. www.iied.org/our-strategy-how-we-monitor-evaluate-our-work / ⁷ Tacoli, C et al. Urban poverty, food security and climate change. IIED. <http://pubs.iied.org/10623IIED> / ⁸ Mohamed, S, Kabarole Research and Resource Centre, Uganda. Personal communication.

Understanding and mapping who is consuming what food, and why. A focus will be on rural and urban low-income groups, and the role of factors such as time, location and space.

Understanding where food comes from, and why. We will look at supply — often an equally powerfully determinant of consumption habits — as well as demand. In many instances, trade systems rather than consumer preference play a major role in shaping food systems — including local and global dimensions, formal and informal trade, and issues related to preferences (for example, safety, location, culture, convenience).

Integrating rural-urban transformations as the wider backdrop to understanding food security. Small urban centres are driven by agricultural growth and non-farm employment. Different configurations of markets and food systems can drive positive or negative links between urbanisation, food security and rural development. Sound policy design must grasp the connections and disconnections between rural and urban spaces, including movements of goods and people.

Understanding informality as a permanent feature of food systems. Informal food vendors remain central to low income groups' access to food in many low and middle-income countries. We need to better understand the strong links between formal food systems and informal distribution, and take action to improve food safety and reduce local environmental hazards in the informal sector.

Improving governance and inclusion. Many of the most affected parties are excluded from policymaking on food, with efforts to include the least heard rarely addressing the power imbalances. But with further support, organised grassroots organisations will be more able to engage in negotiations, and help drive innovations in inclusive governance systems that span urban and rural.

Finding a common vision. Finally, the partners identified the need for a common vision, grounded in evidence. This will be built by learning from innovative experiences and refined through grassroots organisations, practitioners, academics and policymakers coming together to co-produce and share knowledge that spans urban and rural contexts.

Cecilia Tacoli and Bill Vorley

Cecilia Tacoli is a principal researcher in IIED's Human Settlements Group. Bill Vorley is a principal researcher in IIED's Sustainable Markets Group.



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 IFAD. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government or IFAD.

