AfriFOODlinks

Food environments in African cities

The concept of food environments offer planners, technicians and policy makers a lens through which to consider the urban food system from the perspective of the city's residents as they make their daily decisions about what to eat, where to buy food, when to eat it, who to eat with, and so on. **Think of food environments as the consumer interface of the broader food system.** This lens can help us think **beyond an agriculturally focussed framing of urban hunger and nutrition and bring in a wider range of important stakeholders into urban food planning and governance processes.**

Advertising and processed foods

Ads often link these foods to fun and happiness, shaping children's preferences and influencing caregivers' purchases. This impact extends to food options available at school and home, contributing to an environment promoting unhealthy eating habits. In the digital realm, information about food or nutrition online can influence dietary preferences, sometimes negatively.

Questions to consider

What kinds of foods are most commonly being advertised?
Who is being targeted by these food advertisements?
How is social media, digital marketing and online ordering shaping dietary cultures of youth in your city?
Do we know what children in our cities are eating?

How can local governments take action?

- Place advertising restrictions around key products known to be detrimental to health.
- Limit or ban food advertising targeting children, or around schools.
- Establish maternal and infant health support programmes.
- Work to mainstream nutrition programmes in creches and schools
- Consider how zoning and spatial development plans can be used to limit availability of unhealthy foods

Creating safe and hygienic spaces

Concerns around food safety shape the decisions people make about the food they eat and research suggests that concerns around this often push consumers towards choosing highly processed foods over more nutritious options. At the same time, street vendors provide vital, affordable and convenient options, but often struggle to maintain basic food safety standards due to lack of awareness and the challenging contexts in which they work. Finding ways to ensure that market vendors can uphold food safety standards while improving the surrounding environments to be more conducive to food hygiene is essential.

Questions to consider

Are vendors able to practise safe and hygienic practices?
Is there open sewerage or other contaminated water in the vicinity of where people are trading, preparing or eating food?
Do families have safe water for drinking, cooking and cleaning at home?
How prevalent are fears of illegal product adulteration in your city?

How can local governments take action?

- Ensure provision of clean water at strategic points
- Offer food safety training to traders and schools.
- Support food vendors with creative ways to enhance food safety
- Treat urban waste and sewerage problems as a serious food environment risk

SPE-

Bananas
Melon
Squash
Yam
Beans

Energy access and infrastructure

Access to clean and affordable energy for cooking and refrigeration is key to a healthy urban diet. The availability and costs of different sources of energy for food related activities such as cooking and refrigeration can be a powerful hidden driver of food selection. While healthy and affordable dietary options such as whole grains and pulses may be available, the time and costs of cooking these types of healthy foods limits their consumption.

Questions to consider

How much does a specific food item cost to cook?
Is a food item safe for children to cook or prepare at home alone?
Are consumers able to refrigerate food at home?
Do fresh food markets have access to refrigeration to reduce food spoilage and waste?

How can local governments take action?

- Ensure access to affordable energy
- Maintain and improve infrastructure at produce markets (refrigeration and water)

Local enterprises and informal trade, big supermarkets and fast food

The African food retail environment is a rapidly changing space, with many cities seeing the increased presence of international supermarkets, fast food outlets and associated food brands. Retail entities, including local enterprises, informal traders, big retail, and fast food chains, shape our food environment and dietary choices. Local enterprises and informal trade offer fresh, culturally relevant foods, fostering community connections. Big retail outlets often prioritise affordability, while fast food chains sway preferences towards convenient but often less healthy options. Together, they shape accessibility, affordability, and marketing in our food landscape.

Questions to consider

How is the arrival of international food outlets and highly processed products changing the way people in my city eat?
Are traditional food cultures still popular in my city or are these being lost?
Are healthy foods easily affordable and easily accessible to all citizens?
How are products labelled in supermarkets so that consumers can make informed decisions?
Is there still space for small businesses and informal traders in my city, or are they being pushed out by big business?

How can local governments take action?

- Ensure that traditional markets and small businesses are valued and supported
- Create local by-laws that support informal traders to remain part of the retail environment
- Lobby national government for taxes on unhealthy ultra processed foods

Spaces of care and solidarity

In African cities, community kitchens, social welfare efforts, sharing among neighbours, and school feeding schemes all contribute to shaping the food environment. They provide meals and support for vulnerable groups, promote cultural food traditions, and ensure access to nutritious meals for children.

Questions to consider

What social welfare initiatives, contributing to food security, exist in my city?
How do social ties and community solidarity initiatives contribute to food security?
What cultural factors influence dietary behaviours?

How can local governments take action?

- Allocate resources and funding to support neighbourhood initiatives, community kitchens and social welfare programs.
- Collaborate with community organisations to enhance support networks.
- Provide regulatory support and incentives for businesses involved in food-related social welfare activities.
- Integrate spaces of care and solidarity with other social services.

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