URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS

Food is Urban

How do cities shape food systems, and how do food systems impact the lives, health, and opportunities of urban residents?
Highlighting elements like markets, infrastructure, and governance, reveals the vital connections between urban life and the food system. This provides clear entry points for local governments to take action.

Urban food markets

Urban food markets are a vital part of Africa's food system, providing over 80% of food consumed in urban areas and supporting livelihoods, particularly for women. However, these informal hubs face challenges such as traffic congestion, maintenance and pressures from urban developer.

Food governance

Urban food systems require proactive, coordinated governance. Local governments oversee food vending, market support, infrastructure, and transport, while informal systems, national policies, and traditional leaders influence food access, affordability, and land allocation.
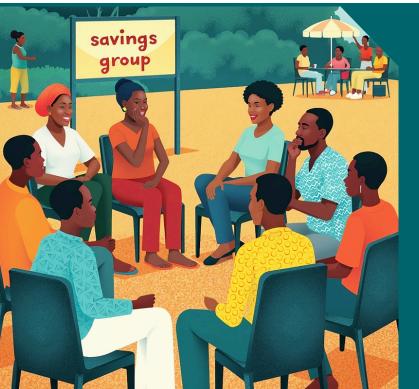
Logistics systems

Metropolitan wholesale markets act as central hubs for food distribution, receiving goods from surrounding regions and supplying both formal and informal markets throughout the city.

Direct food aid

Social safety nets provide essential support to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, disabled, and orphaned children, helping them manage risks and prevent destitution. These programmes, including community soup kitchens, food parcels and emergency food relief, are delivered by a diverse range of large international organisations and small groups of local volunteers.
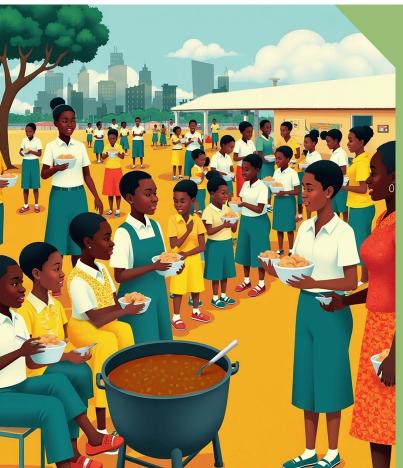
Social infrastructure

Social infrastructure, such as savings groups, help small-scale actors access capital or pool their resources to buy non-perishable food in bulk. Despite their importance, these informal systems are often overlooked and excluded from formal policy discussions.

Street vendors

Street vendors offer accessible, affordable food options, especially for low-income residents who benefit from personal relationships, small-unit purchases, and occasional credit. These vendors bring food directly to communities, reducing the need for costly trips to larger markets.

School nutrition

School meal programmes are crucial in supporting children from low-income households by improving nutrition and encouraging school attendance. Coverage is currently low in many African cities and increasing the reach of these programmes requires collaboration between governments, parents, donors, and the private sector.

Health care systems

Poor urban food governance can lead to health issues, with cities facing hunger, malnutrition, and obesity. This disconnect between health and food systems, especially in informal settlements, complicates efforts to address food-related health challenges effectively.
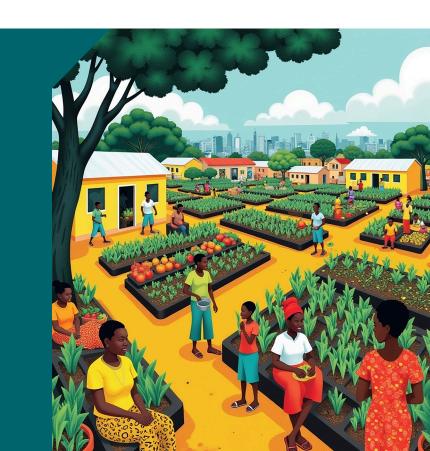
Supermarkets

Supermarkets are expanding across African cities, supplying mainly processed, imported foods alongside some fresh produce. Though they can displace smaller informal vendors, these vendors often operate nearby, as supermarkets remain out of reach for much of the urban population.

Urban agriculture

Urban food growing can supplement food sources but has varying impacts across cities. While well-intentioned, calls for urban agriculture should not shift the responsibility of addressing food insecurity to the poor, and instead require supportive policies to truly enhance food access.
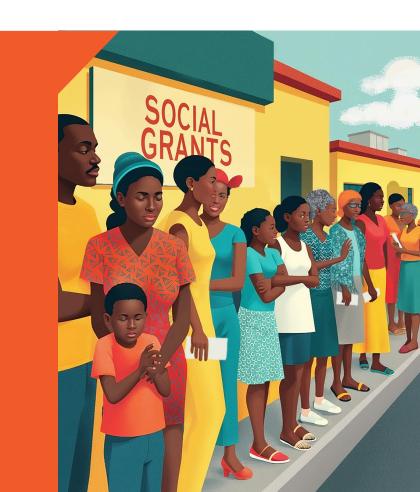
Children and youth

Africa's growing youthful population faces challenges like poverty and unemployment, impacting household food quality. However, early engagement, particularly during the first 1,000 days, offers a chance for youth to drive positive change in urban food systems.

Cash transfers

Cash transfers play a vital role in improving food security by directly supporting those in need. These grants come in various forms, such as pension grants, child grants and emergency cash transfers, to support different segments of society.

Built infrastructure

Urban infrastructure—transport, energy, water, sanitation, and waste management—directly affects food access, quality, and safety in cities. Reliable transport ensures timely food distribution, energy access supports refrigeration and cooking, and clean water and waste management uphold food safety.