INFORMATION BRIEF

BRIEF FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND NGOS

Building the Case for Local Government Food Strategies in an Era of Intersecting Risks and Crises

AfriFOODlinks

TARGETED AUDIENCE:

Civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, activist groups, researchers, concerned citizens

01 Statement of issue encountered

Why Local Government Food Strategies Matter

Cities are increasingly confronted by a convergence of risks that threaten the ability of residents to access affordable, nutritious food. Economic volatility, climate change, public health emergencies, energy disruptions, transport failures, social unrest, inflation, and unemployment interact in ways that intensify food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition. These are not isolated crises. They form part of what is increasingly described as a "polycrisis" where multiple shocks compound existing vulnerabilities.

For civil society organisations, NGOs, faith-based organisations, community kitchens, food relief agencies, and social movements, the challenge is not simply responding to hunger after a crisis occurs. It is influencing local governments, that typically defer to the private sector, to adopt food strategies that reduce vulnerability before crises emerge while strengthening resilience during and after shocks. The experience of Cape Town offers important lessons for cities seeking to establish food strategies capable of addressing both chronic food insecurity and the growing risks associated with economic, social, environmental, and climate disruptions.

Cape Town: Food Insecurity in a City of Plenty

Cape Town is home to significant food production, distribution, processing, and retail infrastructure. Yet food insecurity remains widespread. The city's review of its Food Systems Programme found that between 2020 and 2025 food insecurity worsened despite improvements in food system governance and resilience. Rising food prices, unemployment, poverty, and growing living costs continue to undermine household access to adequate food.

The evidence reveals a troubling reality:

- Adult hunger increased relative to pre-pandemic levels.
- Child hunger remains persistently high.

- Severe food insecurity increased between 2019 and 2024.
- Food basket costs rose sharply over the implementation period.
- Food insecurity is concentrated in poorer neighbourhoods and follows historical patterns of inequality and exclusion.

Importantly, Cape Town's experience demonstrated that food insecurity is not primarily a problem of food production or food availability. Food is generally available. The central problem is access, affordability, and the vulnerability of households exposed to multiple economic and social stresses.

02 Current implementation or action gap

Cape Town's Food Systems Programme: A Governance Innovation

Recognising the interconnected nature of food insecurity, resilience, health, planning, and economic development, the City of Cape Town established a Food Systems Programme in 2020. The programme sought to mainstream food considerations into municipal planning, resilience, climate adaptation, health, economic development, spatial planning, and disaster preparedness.

The programme focused on six areas:

THEME	FOCUS
Governance	Coordination, partnerships, policy integration
Resilience	Preparedness for shocks and disruptions
Production	Sustainable production systems
Food Environments	Food access and spatial planning
Health	Nutrition and healthy diets
Economy	Food livelihoods and enterprise development

A critical innovation was the recognition that food systems cannot be managed by a single municipal department. Instead, food became a transversal issue requiring collaboration across government, civil society, academia, communities, and the private sector.

Lessons from Cape Town: Why Civil Society Matters

One of the strongest findings from Cape Town's experience is that civil society organisations are not peripheral actors. They are essential components of food system resilience. During COVID-19, the taxi strike of 2023, and other disruptions, community kitchens, feeding schemes, NGOs, faith-based organisations, Early Childhood Development centres, informal networks, and food relief organisations became critical food access points for vulnerable households.

The City concluded that:

- It cannot effectively respond to food crises without NGO partnerships.
- Community organisations provide vital intelligence about emerging food insecurity.
- Community kitchens, ECD centres, churches, and local food initiatives form critical "social infrastructure" that strengthens resilience.
- Building relationships with these actors before crises occur is essential.

03 Lessons learnt and insights from AfriFOODlinks

THE POLICY ARGUMENT: WHY EVERY CITY NEEDS A FOOD STRATEGY

Drawing on Cape Town's experience, civil society organisations should advocate for local food strategies built around five core principles.

1. Treat Food Insecurity as a Chronic Risk, Not Only an Emergency

Food insecurity should not be viewed solely as a disaster relief issue. Chronic hunger weakens household resilience long before crises occur and makes recovery more difficult after shocks. Cities must recognise food insecurity as a persistent urban vulnerability, that they includes their participation, requiring long-term intervention.

Advocacy Demand

Call for municipal food strategies that explicitly target hunger, food insecurity, malnutrition, and dietary quality, rather than focusing only on food relief during emergencies.

2. Build Food Resilience Through Risk-Informed Planning

Food systems are affected by:

- Climate change
- Droughts
- Heatwaves
- Energy disruptions
- Transport failures
- Economic shocks
- Inflation
- Civil unrest
- Public health crises
- Global supply chain disruptions

Cape Town's scenario planning repeatedly demonstrated that these risks ultimately reduce food access and affordability.

Advocacy Demand

Require municipalities to undertake food risk assessments and integrate food systems into climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, resilience, and business continuity planning.

3. Recognise Social Infrastructure as Critical Infrastructure

Community kitchens, food relief organisations, ECD feeding programmes, school feeding schemes, faith organisations, informal providers, and local solidarity networks are often the first responders during food crises. Yet they are frequently unsupported and underfunded.

Advocacy Demand

Municipal food strategies should:

- Map community food assets.
- Support food relief networks.
- Establish standing partnerships with NGOs.
- Provide small grants and operational support that unlocks access to other funding and grants.
- Include community organisations in disaster planning.

4. Address Malnutrition, Not Just Hunger

Food insecurity is not only about insufficient calories. Cape Town's programme began by recognising interconnected problems of:

- Child stunting

- Wasting
- Obesity
- Overweight
- Non-communicable diseases

These conditions coexist within the same communities and often within the same households.

Advocacy Demand
Food strategies should include:

- Healthy food environments.
- Nutrition-sensitive planning.
- Protection of healthy food access points.
- Support for ECD nutrition programmes.
- Policies addressing obesogenic food environments.

5. Embed Food Across Government

Cape Town's strongest achievement was not reducing hunger directly. It was mainstreaming food across through internal and external partnerships and multiple policy areas, including:

- Climate strategy
- Resilience planning
- Spatial planning
- Health programmes
- Risk management
- Economic development
- Informal trading policy

Advocacy Demand
Food strategies should not sit solely within agriculture departments. They should involve:

- Multi-sectoral partnerships
- Spatial planning
- Health
- Social development
- Economic development
- Environmental management
- Disaster management
- Transport departments
- Risk management
- Finance

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

Key actions Civil Society can lobby for

ACTION N° 1: GOVERNANCE

- Establish a municipal food systems strategy.
- Create multi-stakeholder food governance platforms.
- Include civil society representation in decision-making.
- Publish annual food system reports.
- Operationalise policy 'windows' for input.
- Hold government accountable through budget and other policy public participation processes.

ACTION Nº 2: FOOD SECURITY MONITORING

- Conduct regular household food security surveys.
- Develop neighbourhood-level food insecurity data.
- Monitor food prices and affordability.

ACTION Nº 3: RESILIENCE AND RISK REDUCTION

- Integrate food into disaster planning.
- Develop food emergency response protocols.
- Establish pre-crisis partnership agreements with NGOs.

ACTION Nº 4: NUTRITION

- Support ECD nutrition initiatives.
- Promote healthy food access in vulnerable communities.
- Address stunting and obesity simultaneously.

ACTION Nº 5: FOOD ACCESS AND INCLUSION

- Improve support for informal food traders.
- Protect community food assets.
- Expand food-sensitive urban planning.

ACTION Nº 6: SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Recognise community kitchens as essential infrastructure.
- Support NGO and faith-based feeding networks.
- Create municipal grant mechanisms for community food organisations.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental lesson from Cape Town is that food insecurity is not merely a food problem. It is the outcome of intersecting vulnerabilities associated with poverty, unemployment, inequality, spatial exclusion, climate risk, infrastructure failures, and recurring shocks. Food insecurity escalates when these risks converge.

For civil society and NGOs, the policy challenge is therefore not simply advocating for more food relief. The goal should be to persuade local governments to adopt integrated food strategies that simultaneously address hunger, malnutrition, resilience, climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, social protection, and urban inequality.

In an age of increasing polycrisis, a food strategy is no longer a specialist policy. It is a foundational urban resilience strategy. The evidence from Cape Town suggests that cities that invest in food governance, social infrastructure, cross-sector collaboration, and preparedness are far better positioned to protect vulnerable residents when the next crisis arrives.

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