INFORMATION BRIEF

IN AFRICA'S CITIES GOVERNING MEAT MATTERS

AfriFOODlinks

TARGETED AUDIENCE:

This brief addresses actors across three interconnected spheres of influence:

- **those with implementing power**, including municipal and national governments, public institutions, businesses and development partners;
- **those with debating and convening power**, including researchers, universities, NGOs, civil society, food systems networks, facilitators and funders; and
- **those holding knowledge and lived experience**, including livestock keepers, pastoralists, traders, butchers, entrepreneurs, community representatives, customary and religious authorities, cultural practitioners and residents.

These spheres overlap, and all have a role in developing a more integrated understanding of meat in African urban food systems.

01 Statement of issue encountered

Meat occupies an important and multifaceted position in African societies. It contributes to nutrition, supports livelihoods and economic activity, and carries cultural, social and symbolic meanings that influence how it is produced, traded, shared and consumed. Livestock, in particular, can function not only as productive assets but also as forms of wealth and social capital, embedded in relationships of reciprocity, kinship and community responsibility (Coertze, 1986; Mapiye et al., 2020). Yet these dimensions are often considered separately. As African cities grow and transform, there is an increasing need to connect these elements, strengthening the capacity of African institutions and societies to understand and shape their relationship with meat from their own realities.

The "meat question" is not simply a question of how much people consume. Its significance extends across nutrition, public health, livelihoods, local economies, cultural identity, religious practice, social obligations and environmental management. In some contexts, livestock and meat play important roles in marriage exchanges, ceremonies and the expression of social relationships. Pastoralism, including the movement of cattle across the Sahel and their trade into urban markets, connects meat to ways of living, cultural knowledge and regional economies. In urban settings, meat also supports businesses, creates places for social interaction and contributes to the everyday life of neighbourhoods.

These relationships are neither uniform across the continent nor static. They are continually shaped by local histories, cultural practices, economic conditions and changing patterns of urbanisation. As people, livestock, goods and businesses move through increasingly interconnected urban and regional systems, the spaces and institutions through which meat is produced, distributed, regulated and consumed also change. Traditional practices may be reinterpreted through commercial activity, while informal traders and food businesses create new spaces for social interaction and economic opportunity.

This makes meat an urban food systems issue as much as an agricultural or nutritional one. Municipalities influence many of the conditions under which meat reaches consumers and supports livelihoods through their responsibilities for public infrastructure, environmental health, food safety, markets, public space and local economic development. However, these responsibilities intersect with national policies, private enterprise, customary institutions, community practices and regional livestock systems. Understanding how these different actors and responsibilities interact is essential to developing effective responses.

Important expertise already exists across these fields. Research and professional practice have generated knowledge on livestock production, food safety, zoonotic disease, nutrition, environmental performance and infrastructure. Cultural and customary institutions hold other forms of knowledge about the meanings and social organisation of meat, while businesses, traders, livestock keepers and communities possess practical experience of how meat systems function. The central opportunity is therefore to strengthen the intellectual, institutional and practical capacity to connect these existing forms of knowledge and experience, enabling African societies to understand and govern meat as an interconnected urban food systems issue (Damasceno, 2026).

This need is particularly relevant as global discussions increasingly consider meat through the lenses of sustainability, environmental impact, health and dietary change. These debates raise important questions, but the circumstances shaping African food systems differ across countries and communities. Nutritional needs, livelihoods, cultural practices, livestock systems and institutional capacities all influence how these questions are experienced locally. Approaches developed elsewhere may offer useful insights, but they cannot be assumed to translate directly into African contexts without careful interpretation and adaptation.

The opportunity, therefore, is not to advocate for a predetermined position on meat consumption or to reject global sustainability agendas. It is to strengthen Africa's capacity to participate in these discussions with its own evidence, experience and perspectives. This requires more than additional research within individual disciplines. It requires intellectual spaces, institutional relationships and practical processes through which different actors can work together, learn from one another and develop responses grounded in the realities of African cities. Meat is present in African societies through diets, livelihoods, identities, cultural practices, markets and municipal institutions. Strengthening the capacity to understand these interconnected roles is essential to shaping informed, locally relevant and coordinated responses as urban food systems evolve.

02 Current implementation or action gap

The central gap is not a lack of activity or expertise. It is the limited capacity to connect existing knowledge, investment and practical action into a shared understanding of meat as an interconnected urban food systems issue. This gap can be understood through three mutually reinforcing dimensions - knowledge, funding and operations - with collaboration across different forms of authority and experience cutting across all three.

Knowledge: expertise exists, but opportunities for integration and joint learning remain limited.
Research, professional practice and cultural and customary knowledge have each generated important insights into meat systems. Academic work has explored livestock productivity, food safety, zoonotic disease, nutrition and environmental performance, while practitioners and communities hold experience of how these systems function in everyday life. Cultural and customary institutions also hold knowledge

about the social meanings of livestock and meat, and the relationships through which they are governed and exchanged. The challenge is not simply that these perspectives are insufficiently brought together; it is that opportunities for them to collaborate, test assumptions, learn from one another and inform coordinated action remain limited. Strengthening these connections is essential to understanding how the different dimensions of meat systems interact and to developing responses that work across them Damasceno (2026).

Funding: investment in individual components does not necessarily build the capacity to manage their relationships.

Investment in livestock value chains, infrastructure and technical improvements has strengthened important parts of meat systems. Yet physical assets and equipment require ongoing operational capacity, management, maintenance, services and stakeholder coordination. The ability to generate local evidence, facilitate collaboration and embed learning in institutional practice also requires resources. Where these capacities receive less sustained attention, investments may improve one component without adequately addressing the wider conditions on which its performance depends. The opportunity is to complement existing infrastructure and sectoral investments with resources that strengthen the relationships, institutions and operational systems required to sustain their benefits.

Operations: responsibilities are distributed across institutions, while the system itself is interconnected.

Markets, abattoirs, environmental health, food safety, informal trade, public space and local economic development can be managed through different departments, programmes and levels of government. Yet decisions in one area influence outcomes in others. The location and condition of facilities affect where people trade and slaughter animals; water access and sanitation affect hygiene and operational reliability; the organisation of markets influences livelihoods, accessibility and oversight. These interactions call for coordinated approaches that recognise the interdependence of municipal responsibilities, rather than treating each intervention as a separate technical problem.

Experiences in African cities illustrate why these connections matter. In Tamale, municipal investment in livestock market and abattoir infrastructure intersected with regional livestock trade and the cultural authority and professional knowledge of the Nakohigu, a respected butchers' clan. The operation of the system could not be understood through municipal ownership or infrastructure alone: relationships between government, livestock suppliers and customary authority also shaped how facilities were managed. This illustrates the importance of recognising existing forms of authority and expertise when designing institutional arrangements.

The Mbale example similarly highlights the relationship between infrastructure and operations. Deteriorating abattoir conditions and unreliable water access contributed to declining confidence in the municipal facility and the dispersal of slaughter activities to informal locations. This complicated oversight and efforts to ensure safe and consistent practices. The example demonstrates how infrastructure, service reliability, user confidence, livelihoods and regulatory capacity interact. It also raises the importance of considering the financial sustainability of operations, including whether better services and stronger user confidence can contribute to reliable revenue and maintenance over time.

Collaboration: the knowledge and authority of different actors need to inform decisions together.

Formal institutions do not shape meat systems alone. Livestock keepers, pastoralists, traders, butchers, entrepreneurs, customary and religious authorities, cultural practitioners, civil society and residents influence how these systems function. Some already participate in local governance, and their contributions should be recognised and supported. The gap is not necessarily the absence of participation, but the need to strengthen opportunities for collaboration across technical disciplines, formal institutions, cultural authority and practical experience. Cultural knowledge should be understood as part of the system's knowledge base, rather than as an additional consideration introduced after technical decisions have been made.

Learning: implementation can generate evidence, but this requires deliberate investment.

Municipal initiatives and local interventions provide opportunities to test approaches, understand their effects and refine responses. However, experience generates transferable knowledge only when it is documented, evaluated and shared, and when learning informs future decisions and investment. Where

these links are weak, useful insights can remain within individual projects or cities rather than contributing to a wider evidence base.

Together, these gaps point to a common challenge: connecting knowledge, funding and operations through stronger collaboration and learning. Addressing it does not necessarily require creating new institutions or laws. It requires making better use of existing structures, strengthening the relationships between them and investing in the capacity to understand and govern meat as part of wider urban food systems.

03 Lessons learnt and insights from AfriFOODlinks

The AfriFOODlinks experience offers useful insights into how meat can emerge as an important urban food systems issue through engagement with cities, and how practical interventions can contribute to wider learning. These insights are relevant beyond the project: they point to opportunities for continental programmes, municipalities, researchers and development partners to recognise overlooked issues and connect implementation with knowledge generation. These lessons draw on the analysis and city experiences documented through AfriFOODlinks and developed in *Meat Is Missing: Towards an African Perspective on Meat as an Urban Food Systems Issue* (Damasceno, 2026).

Lesson 1: Engagement with cities can reveal issues overlooked in wider programme design.
Experience from AfriFOODlinks showed that meat was not initially a central theme in a continent-wide initiative focused on urban food systems. Through engagement with municipal officials, practitioners and city food systems analyses, its significance became increasingly apparent. This suggests that even programmes drawing on strong expertise and input from cities can overlook important dimensions of local food systems. Programme design should therefore allow space for issues to emerge through local engagement and for priorities to evolve as understanding deepens.

Lesson 2: Urban meat systems are shaped by relationships between formal institutions and other forms of authority.
In Tamale, northern Ghana, the municipal livestock market and abattoir connect the city to livestock arriving from surrounding areas and neighbouring countries, including Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. Their operation involves more than municipal infrastructure and regulation. The Nakohigu, a respected butchers' clan with established cultural authority and professional knowledge of meat handling, plays an important role alongside municipal authorities and livestock traders, including Fulani pastoralists. This example illustrates how urban meat systems are shaped through interactions between public institutions, regional trade, customary authority and practical expertise. Understanding these relationships is essential to developing workable governance arrangements (Yakubu & Fuseini, 2026; Damasceno, 2026).

Lesson 3: Infrastructure and operations must be considered together, including financial sustainability.
In Mbale, Uganda, deteriorating abattoir infrastructure and unreliable water access contributed to declining confidence in the municipal facility and the dispersal of slaughter activities to informal locations. This made it more difficult to maintain oversight of food safety, humane slaughter and consistent meat quality. The example illustrates how physical infrastructure, basic services, user confidence and regulatory capacity are interdependent. It also raises a financial sustainability question: can improved conditions and more reliable services encourage users to return to formal facilities and contribute to the revenue needed to maintain them? This relationship should be assessed through practical experience rather than assumed. Investment planning should therefore consider both capital costs and the operational and financial conditions required to sustain benefits over time (Damasceno, 2026).

Lesson 4: Meat systems extend into the cultural and social life of cities.
Shisa Nyama in South Africa and Nyama Choma in Kenya and Tanzania refer to meat cooked over hot coals, but these practices can represent more than a way of preparing food. They create settings where

friends, families and business associates gather, cook, eat and socialise. In many cities, meat vendors and these businesses are found in neighbourhood centres, transport interchanges and other active public spaces, linking food provision with livelihoods and urban social life (Joubert et al., 2018; Battersby & Watson, 2018). These examples show why meat-related activity should not be understood only through formal markets, abattoirs or food safety regulation. It is also part of how people use urban space, maintain social relationships and express cultural identity (Damasceno, 2026).

Lesson 5: Implementation can become a process of knowledge production and institutional learning. AfriFOODlinks interventions involving markets, abattoirs, water storage and conservation, operational improvements and collaborative governance created opportunities to explore how local systems function and how responses might be improved. Such interventions can contribute more than immediate service or infrastructure outcomes when they are accompanied by documentation, evaluation and exchange. Cities can become places where practical experience informs research, where research supports implementation, and where lessons from one context help others ask better questions and adapt their own responses.

Taken together, these lessons support an approach in which research, municipal practice, cultural and customary knowledge, business experience and community participation inform one another. They also highlight the value of connecting local learning across cities, so that practical insights contribute to a wider African understanding of meat. The aim is not to establish one model replicable in all cities, but to strengthen the capacity to learn, adapt and develop responses suited to different contexts.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

ACTION N° 1: BUILD AN AFRICAN-LED, INTERDISCIPLINARY EVIDENCE BASE

For african universities, research networks, funders and practitioners:
Support collaborative research that connects nutrition, public health, livestock systems, urban governance, economics, sociology, culture, religion, environmental sustainability and livelihoods. Build on existing expertise while creating opportunities for different disciplines and forms of knowledge to work together. Cultural practitioners, customary and religious authorities, businesses, livestock keepers and communities should be recognised as contributors to understanding meat systems. The objective is to strengthen the evidence and intellectual capacity through which African institutions and societies can interpret their own contexts and engage critically with global debates.

ACTION N° 2: MAKE EXPERIMENTATION AND EXCHANGE A SUSTAINED SOURCE OF CONTINENTAL LEARNING

For municipalities, NGOs, researchers, development partners and food systems networks:
Support cities and local partners to test context-appropriate approaches, document results, evaluate intended and unintended consequences, and exchange experiences across different settings. Learning should extend beyond identifying successful interventions to understanding why approaches work, for whom, and under what conditions. Over time, these efforts could contribute to a continent-led learning network or platform that connects research with practice, consolidates evidence and strengthens Africa's collective capacity to understand and shape its relationship with meat.

ACTION N° 3: SUPPORT INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE AND STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION

For municipal and national governments, civil society, cultural and religious institutions, businesses and facilitators:
Encourage and resource processes that connect the actors shaping urban meat systems, building on existing governance and community practices wherever possible. This includes public institutions, livestock keepers, pastoralists, traders, butchers, entrepreneurs, customary ahorities, cultural practitioners, researchers and residents. Facilitators and convenors can help these groups identify shared concerns, understand differing interests and connect knowledge that is often separated.

Inclusion should be treated as a means of improving understanding, coordination and decisions, not simply as a procedural requirement.

ACTION Nº 4: STRENGTHEN OPERATIONAL CAPACITY ALONGSIDE INVESTMENT

For municipal and national governments, funders and implementation partners:
Consider the long-term institutional and operational requirements of food systems investments from the outset. Infrastructure and technical improvements need to be supported by reliable services, management, maintenance, coordination and stakeholder relationships. Investment decisions should consider how interventions interact with wider urban systems, and how operational improvements may support service reliability, public confidence, governance performance and financial sustainability. This approach can help ensure that investments deliver lasting benefits and that the capacities required to operate, adapt and sustain them receive appropriate attention.

ACTION Nº 5: ENABLE MUNICIPALITIES TO PLAY AN INTENTIONAL ROLE IN URBAN MEAT SYSTEMS

For municipal leaders and practitioners, supported by national governments, researchers and development partners:
Encourage and resource municipalities to understand how their existing responsibilities influence meat systems and to act on these connections deliberately. Within their wider role in urban food systems, municipalities can identify where meat intersects with public services, infrastructure, health, livelihoods, commerce, cultural practices and public space, and where better coordination could improve outcomes. This does not require every city to adopt the same approach. It requires the capacity to assess local circumstances, work with relevant actors and develop targeted responses informed by evidence and learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Battersby, J., & Watson, V. (2018). Urban food systems governance and poverty in African cities (p. 290). Taylor & Francis.

Coertze, R. D. (1986). Livestock in the social and cultural life of African communities. South African Journal of Ethnology, 9(3), 129-135.

Damasceno, T. (2026). *Meat is Missing: Towards an African Perspective on Meat as an Urban Food Systems Issue*. AfriFOODlinks Working Paper Series, Working Paper 19.

Joubert, L., Battersby, J., & Watson, V. (2018). Tomatoes and taxi ranks: Running our cities to fill the food gaps. African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town.

Mapiye, O., Chikwanha, O. C., Makombe, G., Dzama, K., & Mapiye, C. (2020). Livelihood, food and nutrition security in Southern Africa: what role do indigenous cattle genetic resources play?. Diversity, 12(2), 74.

BRIEF DRAFTED BY: Tiago Damasceno

CONTACT DETAILS: tiago.damasceno@iclei.org

www.afrifoodlinks.org

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

AfriFOODlinks

Funded by the European Union

Coordinated by ICLEI Africa

Project partners