POLICY BRIEF

REFORMING KISUMU COUNTY'S FOOD MARKETS FOR SPATIAL JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

AfriFOODlinks

TARGETED AUDIENCE:

This policy brief is targeted at the County Government of Kisumu & Development Partners

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

For generations, Kisumu's identity has been deeply rooted in its markets; the city's name itself derives from the traditional Luo word *kisuma*, meaning "a place to find food". Today, food markets like Kibuye and Jubilee remain the primary nodes of food distribution, livelihood generation, and social connection for Kisumu's population.

Drawing from studies conducted under the AfriFOODlinks project, this policy brief advocates for a transition from exclusionary, top-down formalization toward inclusive *in situ* upgrading and hybrid governance. By recognizing "people as infrastructure," Kisumu can leverage its markets to drive economic equity, food security, and green innovations.

01 Statement of problem

Kisumu's urban markets suffer from severe deficits in basic services, including unpaved pathways, poor drainage, a lack of running water, and inadequate sanitary facilities, and trading spaces. While women constitute most retail food micro-vendors, they face profound structural precarity. Men dominate high-capital, high-margin, and mobile nodes (wholesale trade, butchery, transport), while women are disproportionately restricted to fixed, low-margin retail of perishable produce.

Wealthier traders, syndicate leaders, or political elites capture formal municipal stall leases and act as "informal landlords," subleasing spaces to poorer female vendors at highly inflated, unregulated daily rates because women rarely hold formal municipal leases. While the county extracts significant revenue from daily ticketing fees and stall rentals, very little of this capital is reinvested back into the markets' physical infrastructure or waste management systems.

02 Current policy or process gap

- **The "Modernist Lens":** Municipal governance frequently views informal markets through a restrictive lens, treating them as chaotic obstacles to a "clean city" rather than critical public infrastructure.
- **Displacement-Focused Spatial Planning:** Top-down urban planning and beautification schemes frequently attempt to relocate informal vendors to city peripheries to make way for "smart" infrastructure, clashing directly with the survival strategies of low-income vendors.
- **Enforcement Disconnect:** While municipal authorities hold formal regulatory mandates, they lack the capacity to manage daily operations. When formal authorities try to enforce spatial order without consulting informal market committees, itleads to heavy-handed crackdowns, confiscation of goods, and tax resistance from traders.

03 Lesson learnt and insights

- **The Power of Sync and Micro-Logistics:** Kisumu's markets operate on highly synchronized, informal schedules—such as Kibuye's pre-dawn nocturnal wholesale shift—that defy rigid municipal timetables and depend heavily on micro-logistics like boda-bodas and handcarts.
- **Co-Produced Order:** De facto daily order, dispute resolution, and security are co-produced effectively by informal market committees rather than formal enforcement alone.
- **Waste-to-Resource Circularity:** Recent initiatives at the Obunga Fish Market demonstrate that recovering organic fish byproducts and processing them into high-protein animal feed and manure creates green jobs for youth and women while resolving municipal waste management crises.
- **Decentralized Green Energy Benefits:** Transitioning to solar micro-grids provides reliable, low-cost lighting that extends safe trading hours into the night and powers communal cold storage, drastically reducing post-harvest loss.
- **Value of In Situ Upgrades:** Supplying vendors with targeted hygiene training, shaded stalls, and secure land tenure successfully preserves existing customer networks while improving the food and working environment without displacement.
- **Integrated markets and commuter nodes:** That spatial market informality follows high human traffic routes in the evenings. Integrating transport nodes with markets would serve to reduce spatial informality.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

ACTION N° 1: SECURE INCLUSIVE LAND TENURE AND RESTRUCTURE STALL ALLOCATION

- ***Legally Zone Markets:*** The County Department of Lands & Physical Planning should legally zone and gazette existing informal food markets to prevent land-grabbing and displacement.
- ***Reform Stall Allocation:*** The County Department of Trade needs to reform the allocation process to bypass exploitative "informal landlords" and prioritize direct, subsidized, long-term leases for active, low-income female vendors.

- ***Integrate transport nodes with markets:*** Integrate transport nodes with markets to reduce spatial informality.

ACTION N° 2: SUPPORT HYBRID GOVERNANCE VIA FLACK AND CITY FOOD DESKS

- ***Engage Market Committees:*** The City Board & Kisumu City Manager should integrate and engage informal market committees through the newly proposed Kisumu City Food Systems Desk, ensuring market representatives have a direct say in spatial plans affecting markets.
- ***Co-Design Regulations:*** The Food Liaison Advisory Council of Kisumu (FLACK) should serve as the primary platform to co-design market regulations with traders, ensuring "taxation with representation" by directly linking market fees to localized service delivery (WASH and waste management).

ACTION N° 3: SUPPORT HYBRID GOVERNANCE VIA FLACK AND CITY FOOD DESKS

- ***Ring-Fence Revenue:*** The County Department of Finance & Trade should ring-fence a minimum percentage of market-collected revenues to fund immediate *in situ* upgrades.
- ***Prioritize Core Services:*** Priority must be given to clean water access, gender-segregated sanitation facilities, and solar-powered cold storage kiosks at wholesale hubs.

ACTION N° 4: NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS ALONE WILL NOT RESOLVE FOOD INSECURITY

- ***Replicate Circular Models:*** The County Departments of Environment & Agriculture should encourage the replication of the successful Obunga waste-to-resource model in other fish markets.
- ***Establish Sorting Hubs:*** Establish localized sorting hubs at Kibuye and Jubilee markets to divert organic waste to composting facilities by partnering with local youth and women's self-help groups.

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