INFORMATION BRIEF

TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS IN AFRICAN CITIES

An investment opportunity for healthier, more resilient and inclusive urban futures

AfriFOODlinks

TARGETED AUDIENCE:

Who's this brief for?: governments, development finance institutions, bilateral and multilateral agencies, foundations, impact investors and other funders looking for practical, scalable opportunities that improve urban food systems and create lasting impact.

INTRODUCTION:

AfriFOODlinks Project

AfriFOODlinks is an EU funded project running for four years and it aims to improve food and nutrition security while delivering positive outcomes for climate and the environment, and building socio-ecological resilience in 65+ (15 African and 5 European Hub & Sharing cities and 45+ Network Cities) cities by:

- promoting public shifts to sustainable healthy diets;
- transforming urban food environments through real-world socio-technical experiments;
- promoting inclusive multi-actor governance to empower public officials, established and informal small businesses, communities, youth and women with ownership and agency to shape their food systems;
- and accelerating innovative, women- and youth-led agri-food businesses to support local value addition and inclusive economic participation.

The Proposition

Urban food systems are an overlooked investment entry point for achieving priorities that funders already care about, from **child nutrition and public health to jobs, infrastructure, climate resilience, food loss and waste, and social protection**. AfriFOODlinks provides a practical platform through which funders can invest in these outcomes through cities, using existing mandates and financing mechanisms.

The scale opportunity

AfriFOODlinks plans to expand from 15 cities into 15 national networks of four cities per country, reaching at least 60 cities by 2036. The project's braided funding strategy seeks to mobilise $200,000 per city per year, representing a total funding target of $120 million over ten years. Each city will become a centre of excellence for urban food policy, governance and practice, with the ambition of reaching more than 120 million people.

60+ cities by 2036	**$120m** 10-year funding ambition	**$200k** indicative investment per city/ year	**120m+** people potentially reached

01 Statement of issue encountered

WHY CITIES? WHY NOW?

Africa's urban transition is becoming a food-system transition

Urban food systems are the people, businesses, organisations and activities that shape how food gets to people in cities from growing and processing food, to transporting, selling and consuming it, and managing food waste. They extend beyond city boundaries, connecting cities with the rural and peri-urban areas that supply them. More than half of the world's population now live in urban areas, and this share is expected to reach nearly 70% by 2050, driven largely by rapid urbanisation, especially in low- and middle-income countries across Africa and Asia[1]. Cities and peri-urban areas are home to more than half of the world's population and account for over 70% of global food consumption[2]. At the same time, the ways in which cities source, distribute and consume food are linked to major environmental, health and social pressures. In Africa, these pressures are particularly acute. In 2024, more than 20% of the population was undernourished and 58.9% experienced moderate or severe food insecurity[3]. Around two-thirds of Africa's population, just over 1 billion people, were unable to afford a healthy diet in 2024. Sub-Saharan Africa is also the only region where the number of stunted children under five continues to increase, with 62 million children affected[4].

URBANISATION As cities grow, more people depend on complex networks of markets, retailers, traders, processors, logistics providers and public institutions to access food.	**HEALTH & NUTRITION** Changing lifestyles, food environments, affordability and dietary transitions are contributing to unhealthy diets and a growing burden of malnutrition in cities[4]
LIVELIHOODS & ECONOMIES Urban food systems connect producers, businesses, vendors and consumers, creating opportunities to strengthen local economies and livelihoods.	**CLIMATE & RESILIENCE** Food systems intersect with climate risk, resource use, food loss and waste, infrastructure and the capacity of cities to withstand shocks.

Cities are a point of leverage

Treating cities simply as consumers rather than as integral parts of the food system leaves significant economic, social and environmental value unrealised. Cities sit close to consumers, retailers and households, while also connecting upstream production with the markets where demand is ultimately expressed. This means that investments made through cities can connect outcomes that are often financed separately: nutrition, public health, jobs, markets and infrastructure, climate resilience, waste management and social protection.

[1] Lundberg, K. et al. (2025) 'Paving the way: Urban Health, Food Systems, and the Imperative for Holistic City-Led Action,' F1000Research, 14, p. 513. 10.12688/f1000research.163042.1
[2] High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE). (2024). Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation. Rome, CFS HLPE-FSN.
[3] The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025 (2025) FAO; IFAD; UNICEF; WFP; WHO; eBooks. https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6008en.
[4] UNICEF, WHO and World Bank Group (2025) *Joint Malnutrition Estimates 2025 edition.* New York: UNICEF. Available at: https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/ (Accessed: 21 July 2026).
[5] de Bruin, S. & Holleman, C. (2023). Urbanization is transforming agrifood systems across the rural–urban continuum creating challenges and opportunities to access affordable healthy diets – Background paper for The State of Food Security and Nutrition in FAO Open Knowledge the World 2023

02 Current implementation or action gap

The financing opportunity is one of alignment

There is currently no comprehensive estimate of the global investment gap for urban food systems. Available evidence nevertheless points to the scale of financing required for more sustainable food systems and healthier diets, including interventions to reduce food loss and waste and strengthen local linkages between urban consumers and farmers. The deeper challenge is how investment is organised. Food continues to be treated primarily as a rural and agricultural issue, even though many of the pressures on food security, nutrition, public health, affordability and waste are increasingly concentrated in cities.

FRAGMENTED MANDATES	WEAK INVESTMENT OWNERSHIP	TOO FEW INVESTMENT-READY PIPELINES
Agriculture, health, urban development, infrastructure, climate, waste and social protection are commonly financed through separate institutions and programmes.	Local governments may manage markets, public health, land-use planning, waste and social services, but often lack the mandate, capacity and financing to lead integrated food-system transformation.	Funders need clear ownership, defined governance, implementation pathways, accountable budgets and measurable outcomes—not simply additional pilots or research.

The opportunity is not to create another funding silo, but to connect existing capital to urban food-system opportunities that can make that capital work harder

03 Lessons learnt and insights from AfriFOODlinks

What funders told us

Insights from a Brussels roundtable hosted by ICLEI CityFood on 5 November 2025, involving national governments, foundations, DFIs and multilateral institutions, were subsequently confirmed through interviews with additional funders. Together, these conversations point to a clear message: There is interest in urban food systems but too few opportunities are clearly framed, packaged and owned in ways that enable funders to invest and support them at scale.

WHAT FUNDERS TOLD US	WHAT THIS MEANS FOR INVESTMENT
Don't create a new financing category.	Frame urban food investments around existing mandates such as nutrition, public health, businesses, waste, climate and disaster resilience.
Cities are where priorities converge.	Use the city as an entry point where multiple existing priorities can be addressed together.
Ownership matters.	Create clear institutional and political ownership, with defined governance and accountable budgets.
Evidence is not the main constraint.	Translate evidence into investment-ready programmes, rather than additional pilots or research alone.
Scale matters.	Build portfolios that can be replicated across cities and connected to national development priorities and existing financing mechanisms.
Tangible investments build buy-in.	Embed governance within visible investments such as markets, school meals, logistics, food safety and infrastructure.

The central proposition

Urban food systems can function as an integrating framework, helping existing investments deliver wider and more connected outcomes rather than competing with them for a separate funding stream. AfriFOODlinks' eight thematic braids make these connections explicit.

One investment. Multiple returns

Well-targeted investments can strengthen food and nutrition security, improve access to health, water, sanitation and hygiene services, build resilience to climate shocks, support farmers and food entrepreneurs, reduce food loss and waste, and strengthen local economies.

HEALTH	LIVELIHOODS	CLIMATE	CITIES	EQUITY
healthier diets; improved child nutrition; prevention of diet-related disease	jobs; stronger food enterprises; improved farmer and vendor incomes	less food loss and waste; greater resilience; circular food economies	stronger markets; better infrastructure; improved planning and governance	greater access to affordable nutritious food; benefits for women, youth, children and low-income households

Eight investment pathways

AfriFOODlinks' ambition to expand across 60+ cities over the next decade requires a funding approach that can match this scale while remaining flexible to how different funders operate. Consistent with feedback from funders, the fundraising strategy is designed to enable partners to invest through their existing mandates, priorities, budget lines and results frameworks without requiring new funding instruments or dedicated budget lines. Building on the €11.8 million seed investment from the European Commission, the strategy aims to mobilise $200,000 per city per year over the next decade to expand and sustain AfriFOODlinks' work. This investment comes at a critical moment, as Africa experiences rapid urbanisation and population growth, decisions made over the next 25 years will shape the food systems on which millions of people depend for generations to come. Funders can therefore engage through the entry point that best aligns with their existing mandate, budget line or results framework, while contributing to a broader, interconnected effort to transform urban food systems.

INVESTMENT PATHWAY	FOR FUNDERS ALREADY INVESTING IN…	WHAT YOUR INVESTMENT COULD ENABLE
Nourished Children	School meals, child health, education, nutrition	Locally sourced school meals, healthier food environments and stronger links between schools, farmers and local food businesses.
Healthy Cities	Public health, NCD prevention, health systems, inclusion	City-level action on diets, nutrition, food environments and prevention of diet-related disease.
Markets & Infrastructure	Urban infrastructure, WASH, municipal services, value chains	Modernisation of fresh-food markets, logistics, storage, sanitation and other infrastructure connecting producers to consumers.
Food Loss & Waste	Climate mitigation, circular economy, waste management	Food rescue, redistribution, composting, valorisation and other circular food-economy enterprises.
Enterprise & Livelihoods	SME finance, youth employment, financial inclusion	Growth and de-risking of food businesses, traders, entrepreneurs and circular-economy enterprises.
Improved Governance	Decentralisation, public administration, institutional strengthening	Food systems desks, coordination mechanisms, planning capacity, data and multi-stakeholder governance.
Culinary Heritage	Culture, tourism, local economic development	Protection and promotion of local food cultures, traditional foods and food-based economic opportunities.
Urban Social Infrastructure	Social protection, humanitarian response, disaster and climate resilience	Food access and resilience programming in vulnerable, rapidly growing and conflict-affected cities.

Two connectors make the model work

African Research - for funders who prioritise data, monitoring and evaluation, evidence-building and learning. Network & Advocacy, for funders who prioritise policy dialogue, political rooting and engagement with mayors and national governments.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

What this looks like in practice

AfriFOODlinks experience across cities demonstrates how practical interventions can create entry points for governance, investment preparation and wider systems change.

ACTION N° 1: DAKAR — SCHOOL MEALS AND LOCAL PROCUREMENT

In Dakar, AfriFOODlinks supported the development of an integrated school meals model linking healthy food provision, local sourcing and collaboration with private food providers. The model was tested in one school and has helped the municipality structure a more scalable approach, with the potential to extend school meals to additional districts through future municipal budgeting. This illustrates how school feeding can become an entry point for nutrition, local economic development, public procurement and municipal food policy.

ACTION N° 2: OUAGADOUGOU — GREEN BELT AND TERRITORIAL FOOD GOVERNANCE

In Ouagadougou, work around the Green Belt has supported a long-term process connecting agroecological production, climate resilience, local value chains, social inclusion and territorial planning. Through multi-stakeholder dialogue, Living Lab activities and exchanges with technical and financial partners, the city has progressively strengthened its role in coordinating actors and positioning the Green Belt within a broader territorial food governance process. This illustrates how investment in urban food systems can support both concrete territorial interventions and long-term governance capacity.

ACTION N° 3: FOOD SYSTEMS DESK AND INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION

In Lusaka, the establishment of a Food Systems Desk created an institutional entry point to coordinate food-related initiatives across municipal departments and external partners. Rather than focusing only on a single infrastructure project, this approach highlights the importance of investing in governance, planning capacity, data, interdepartmental coordination and multi-stakeholder platforms. It shows how relatively targeted support to municipal coordination mechanisms can help embed food systems into wider city planning.

ACTION N° 4: KISUMU — MARKETS, FOOD RESCUE AND CIRCULAR SYSTEMS

In Kisumu, AfriFOODlinks has connected market infrastructure, food waste reduction, food rescue and circular economy approaches. These initiatives show how investments in markets, cold storage, waste diversion and redistribution systems can simultaneously reduce food loss, improve access to nutritious food, support livelihoods and strengthen urban resilience. Kisumu therefore illustrates the value of funding urban food systems at the interface between infrastructure, services and social impact.

ACTION N° 5: MEDITERRANEAN DIET LABELLING

In Chefchauen, AfriFOODlinks has supported the city to implement the mediterranean diet labeling to reinforce cultural heritage, food sustainability, and economic development to preserve traditional produce and recipes, and protect the environment, local economy, increasing tourism and social pride. Again, this one is an interesting intersection between rural and urban with the City taking a championing role in it. Through structured governance, transparent certification, and a commitment to heritage preservation rather than commercialisation, the project ensures that Chefchaouen continues to serve as a global model for sustainable, heritage-based gastronomy.

CONCLUSION

Choose your level of investment

Funders can engage at the level that matches their risk appetite, budget cycle and existing country presence.

LEVEL	WHAT IT MEANS	SUITED TO
START - One city	Fund a single braid in a single city at $200,000 per city per year, providing a focused way to test alignment with the AfriFOODlinks delivery model.	Funders seeking a focused, lower-risk entry point.
CONNECT - National network	Fund a combination of braids across a national network of four cities, nested inside an existing national relationship.	Funders with country programmes and national government relationships.
SCALE - One braid, continent-wide	Sustain a single thematic braid across 60+ cities, supporting replication and a consistent evidence base.	DFIs and foundations with a global or sector-wide thematic mandate.
SUSTAIN - Core and connectors	Provide flexible funding to the secretariat, African Research and Network & Advocacy connectors, maintaining the coordination layer across the portfolio	Funders prioritising system coordination, evidence and political durability.

If you are interested in learning more, tell us which of the eight pathways most closely matches what your institution already funds, and we will share the specific cities, budgets, delivery partners and evidence base ready for investment in that area. If you are not yet sure where you fit, we are also glad to talk through your existing priorities and identify the braid or combination of braids that best advances them.

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