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RETHINKING THE INFORMAL FOOD SECTOR OF NAIROBI

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Opinion Briefs is a thought-provoking series that expands on the findings of the Urban Food Futures' scoping report, *Pathways to Transform Urban Food Systems* (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023). Authored by the team and partners of Urban Food Futures, this collection serves as a stepping stone to enrich and deepen our work. With a collective vision to implement the pathways outlined in the scoping report, the series presents fresh insights, in-depth analysis, and innovative perspectives. These thoughtfully crafted briefs aim to challenge conventional notions and explore new horizons in the realm of urban food systems transformation to ignite meaningful discussions and catalyse tangible actions.

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Photo credit: Akiba Mashinani Trust (2023)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The food system of Nairobi is characterised by multidimensional fragmentation, inequality, and power asymmetry, making access to and affordability of food more central in food security debates than availability.

Characterised by solidarity entrepreneurship and driven by the logic of everyday survival and community, the importance of the informal sector for food security is widely discussed, however action research for shaping policies to strengthen the informal sector requires a more fluid, accommodating, accepting, and pragmatic understanding of informal economies than is common practice. Informal traders are often organised and knowledgeable service providers but described as ineffective and a 'problem' and penalised and criminalised as such. Rather, it would be helpful to recognise and support the agility, ability to rapidly respond to changes, and innovation of the informal sector. This paper highlights the need for representation and organisation of informal actors (e.g., via innovative food vendor associations) and the need to build upon their obvious strengths

(e.g., bulk shopping, sharing information and knowledge, saving schemes) for food security promotion in informal settlements. Women play a central role in the informal sector and food security at various levels such as trading and supplying the household. Cash transfer programmes, which proved to be successful in crisis situations, and other social protection measurements are solutions from a political-institutional perspective. Physical infrastructure improvements (e.g. storage and cooling facilities and access to water with corresponding governmental responsibility) and coordination of logistic services are crucial services, with entrepreneurial approaches via start-ups that support the informal sector through information and communication technology (ICT), data access, and digital infrastructure serving as key support mechanisms.

1

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this opinion brief is to approach the question: What role does the informal economy play in Nairobi's food system? Offering a multitude of advantages to job seekers, "the informal economy is far more than just an option of last resort" (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023, p. 102) and so lucrative that, in 2019, Kenya's informal economy accounted for an estimated 81.1% of total (non-agricultural) employment (Riisgaard et al., 2023). If informal activities were accounted for, the Kenyan informal sector would contribute an additional 32% to the country's GDP (GAIN, 2020). Informality provides a cornucopia of goods and services to African consumers, but "urban-food based enterprises account for the lion's share" (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023, p. 6) of informal economies across Africa. For example, in Nairobi informal settlements, most household calories are sourced through informal vendors (Owuor, 2018; Jepkoech, 2020). The important connection between urban food security and the informal sector is now widely discussed in academia, but less often recognised by global and local policy makers (Brown, 2019). This paper takes a pro urban poor stance in exploring the Nairobi food system and aims to contribute to a rethinking of the informal food sector.



● **Figure 1** Social interaction, price negotiation, barter and selection of goods at a Vegetable Vendor at Wape Wape, Mukuru kwa Njenga.
Source: Akiba Mashinani Trust, 2023

WHAT ROLE DOES THE INFORMAL ECONOMY PLAY IN NAIROBI'S FOOD SYSTEM?



● **Figure 2** Fruit Vendor at Wape Wape, Mukuru kwa Njenga
Source: Akiba Mashinani Trust, 2023

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TERMINOLOGY & CHALLENGING THE FORMALITY BIAS

A clear definition of informal economies is difficult (Schiller, 2015). The best-known definition and one most frequently used for statistical analyses come from the International Labor Organization (c.f. Schiller, 2015): “The informal economy refers to all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements. It thrives mostly in a context of high unemployment, underemployment, poverty, gender inequality and precarious work” (ILO, n.d.). Within informal economies, an important distinction is made between *informal employment* and *informal sector* (see Grözinger & Djabateng, 2023). Informal employment is the broader concept and can be a part of the informal sector, formal sector, and household sector (Grözinger & Djabateng, 2023; ILO, 2018) and is described by GAIN (2020, p. 2): “Those that are informally employed enjoy no legal or social protection. The person is not subjected to national

labour legislation, income taxation, social protection, or entitlement to employment benefits (such as paid annual or sick leave)”. The informal sector “can be defined as all economic activities that take place in unincorporated, small, or unregistered enterprises. In most cases there is little to no coverage by formal authorities for monetary, regulatory, and institutional arrangements such as taxation” (GAIN, 2020, p. 1).

Despite the informal sector’s economic importance in Kenya, a lack of precise descriptions and definitions hampers understanding of context-specific situations in Kenya (Brown, 2019; Hitimana et al., 2011; see also Hauser et al., 2022). ‘Informal’ is often considered the opposite of ‘formal’ (analogous to Western conceptions) and fails to shift consideration from what informal players are ‘lacking’ to the actual informal work, actors, and markets (Riisgaard et al., 2023). The informal sector is often criminalised and perceived, generalised,

and characterised as negative, insecure (e.g., lack of social security), and isolated (from all formal systems) which “creates a false binary between formal and informal economies” (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023, p. 61; see also Ram et al., 2017; Rigon et al., 2020). For example, the “misconception of street vending as an ‘unorganized’ and ‘temporary’ activity which happens within a ‘vague legal and institutional frameworks as well as a hostile operating environment’” often leads to conflictual interactions with public authorities (Riisgaard et al., 2023, p. 7). Riisgaard et al. (2023) criticise this formality bias as a Eurocentric notion stemming from a post-World War II North Atlantic context, which fails to see the more than 2 billion workers (60% of the world’s employed population) who contribute to informal systems (ILO, 2018).

There is a need to think about informality/informal economies more fluidly, flexibly, and inclusively to understand the food system of Nairobi. Informal economies are located on a continuum of formal and informal institutions (Schiller, 2015). The reality in Nairobi shows a complex picture with informal and formal spheres intersecting and overlapping in numerous ways, rendering the formal–informal dichotomy restrictive (Owuor, 2020; Riisgaard et al., 2023). Examples of this might be the

informal employment of a person in a formally registered business or informal retail trading of items purchased from formal wholesale markets. Riisgaard et al. (2023, p. 3) urge us to decentre and broaden analysis of informal and formal systems “rather than continue the formalizing strategy of insisting that reality should conform to the model.” Crucial to this is the inclusion of informal trade in the urban food system on an equal footing with formal trade, along with its strengths, weaknesses, potentials, and obstacles. Combining the strengths of informality (e.g., barter, credit, small purchases, proximity to work and home locations, social interaction) with the often-praised characteristics of formality (e.g., commitment, transparency, organisation, and security) could lead to what Owuor (2020) refers to as “inclusive growth”. This could take a myriad of forms in Nairobi, for example, the incorporation of food vendors associations comprised of tax-paying, registered small-scale vendors who cooperate in bulk purchases, saving schemes, credit and grant mobilisation, and joint lobbying and advocacy efforts (Ahmed et al., 2014, 2015; Githiri et al., 2016). As a group of formally recognised, networked microenterprises, informal actors could serve as a voice for poorer Kenyans and an entry point for interventions targeting the constitutional right to food.

“THE INFORMAL ECONOMY REFERS TO ALL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES BY WORKERS AND ECONOMIC UNITS THAT ARE – IN LAW OR IN PRACTICE – NOT COVERED OR INSUFFICIENTLY COVERED BY FORMAL ARRANGEMENTS. IT THRIVES MOSTLY IN A CONTEXT OF HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT, UNDEREMPLOYMENT, POVERTY, GENDER INEQUALITY AND PRECARIOUS WORK”

ILO, n.d.

3

OVERVIEW OF NAIROBI'S INFORMAL FOOD SECTOR

The food system of Nairobi is characterised by multidimensional fragmentation, inequality, and power asymmetry. The informal sector is the backbone of the urban poor's food supply system in Nairobi (Owuor et al., 2017; Owuor, 2020). The informal sector is crucial for urban food system transformation and to reach the goal of "food security, improved nutrition and affordable healthy diets for all" (FAO, 2021). Tschirley et al. (2010) estimate over 50% of food purchases across Nairobi are made from informal traders, with poor households from informal settlements making the bulk of those purchases. Without the informal food trade, the urban poor would have extremely limited access to food (Hauser et al., 2022). For example, many

residents of Viwandani cannot afford transportation to formal marketplaces to source their main staple food, *ugali* (made from maize flour); they rely on informal vendors who source it from formal retail or wholesale markets and sell it in Viwandani at comparatively high prices.

The main foods made available in informal settlements through informal traders are fresh fruit and vegetables (over 40% of vendors market these products), cooked food (over 30%), animal products (12%) and uncooked food like cereals (7%) (Owuor et al., 2017). The perishability and seasonality of fresh fruit and vegetables provide a window of opportunity for local informal vendors who can respond to the post-harvest handling requirements of and local preferences for certain crops, particularly highly nutritious leafy vegetables such as collard greens (*sukuma wiki*), curly kales, (*sukuma matumbo*), African nightshade (*managu or mnavu*), and amaranth (*terere or mchicha*) (Gido et al., 2016) in addition

**THE INFORMAL SECTOR IS THE
BACKBONE OF THE URBAN POOR'S
FOOD SUPPLY SYSTEM IN NAIROBI.**



Figure 3 Preparation of cooked meals (*chapati*) in Mukuru kwa Reuben.
Source: Akiba Mashinani Trust, 2023

to Swiss chard (*spinach*) and cowpea greens (*kunde*). Over 75% of informal fresh fruit and vegetable vendors in Nairobi purchase their goods from one of Nairobi’s formal markets (see Figure 4), 10-13% purchase from wholesalers, and 4-9% purchase at the farm gate (Owuor, 2020). Due to their limited income, poor residents of Kibera purchase food in small amounts from vendors who, in turn, purchased them from the vast array of vendors for dry and fresh nutritious foods at the Toi Market located north of Kibera (see Figure 4). With informal food vendors managing the last mile and selling small unit packages to the urban

poor within their neighbourhood (Hauser et al., 2022), individual households in Kibera are relieved of the need to pay transportation costs to Toi Market. However, under this system (*kadogo economy*), food prices are higher than in markets and supermarkets and the urban poor pay more for food in Nairobi than richer households do (Sonntag, 2021; Downs et al., 2022). If households in Kibera had more income, a larger market would exist for vendors in Kibera itself. Indeed, Hauser et al. (2022, p. 6) summarise this as “commodities and products for which there is no market will gradually disappear”.

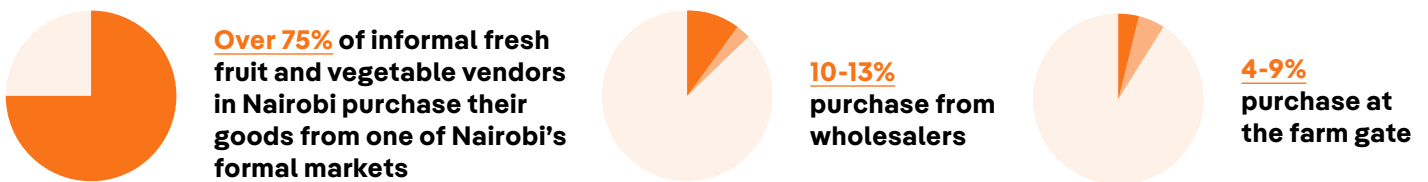
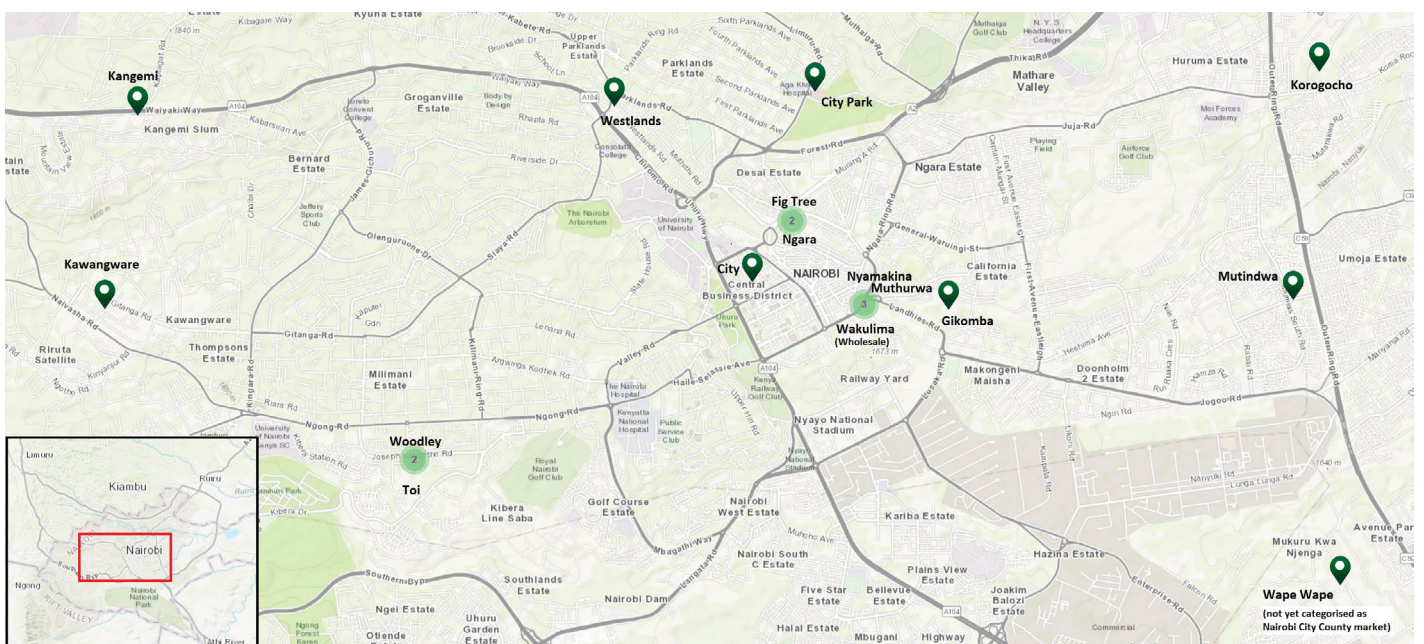


Figure 4. Overview of retail/wholesale markets in central Nairobi (no claim to completeness)



Source: Own illustration based on Kulke et al. (2022); Linehan (2015); Owuor et al. (2017)

4

UNDER- STANDING THE DIMENSION: PROBLEM OR POTENTIAL?

Nairobi's population is growing exponentially. In 2019, Nairobi City County (excluding the larger metropolitan areas) had 4.4 million inhabitants (KNBS, 2019), of whom 2 million lived below the poverty line (Owuor et al., 2017; Omwenga, 2010). The total population size is predicted to swell to 14.2 million by 2050 (Hoorweg & Pope, 2014). This growth will have profound direct impacts on food systems including cultivation, logistics, trade, and consumption (Abrahams, 2009; Battersby & Crush, 2014).

Hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition with tremendous effects on health are rampant across Kenya, with 68.5% of Kenya's population being food insecure in 2021 (FAO, 2021) and 58% of households in 23 sampled areas of Nairobi being food insecure in 2018 (Owuor, 2018). Yet, in poor, urban

settlements, the statistics are even more drastic: over 80% of households in informal settlements are considered food insecure (Kimani-Murage et al., 2023), with certain low-income groups including orphans and vulnerable children, those with low levels of education, women (particularly single household heads), the elderly, migrants, and those with precarious employment being particularly vulnerable (Owuor et al., 2017).

Informal employment in Kenya and Nairobi is expected to grow in the future (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023). Indeed, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung predicts that 93% of new jobs in Africa are in the informal sector (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023) and those currently employed in the informal sector do not want to switch to the formal market (Owuor, 2020). Kenya's National Bureau of

Statistics recorded a total of 268,100 licensed and 782,500 unlicensed enterprises in Nairobi in 2016 (KNBS, 2016). Some of the former and all the latter would qualify as operating in the informal sector (Owuor et al., 2017). Youth play a significant role in the sector with nearly two-thirds of vendors being

under 35 years of age (Owuor, 2020). Combining surging population sizes, a ballooning youth bulge, an onslaught of new jobs in the informal sector, and flexibility of work conditions in the sector creates an attractive option for job seekers and a potential entry point for interventions.



● **Figure 5** Food vendor offering Lake Victoria Sardine (*omena*), tomato and onion salad (*kachumbari*) and potato fries (*chipo*) in Mukuru kwa Njenga. Source: Akiba Mashinani Trust, 2023

VIEWING INFORMALITY IN THE URBAN FOOD SYSTEM THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

Informal employment plays a major role in many African economies and urban food systems and women are central in those systems. Across Africa, 60% of women work in the informal sector (UN Habitat & UN Women, 2020); in fact, women are more likely than men to work in the informal economy and more involved in domestic work than men (Metelerkamp, 2023). Owuor's recent (2020) survey of 1,267 informal food vendors from eight administrative divisions found that "there were roughly equal numbers of men and women among the vendors, with women

making up 51% of the sample" (p. 6) indicating that men may be more active in informal trade outside of informal settlements and women may be more active in informal trade within informal settlements. In the Nairobi context, "selling fruit and vegetables is the leading income-generating activity for low-income women" (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023, p. 64). These roles signify women's central importance in food security work as they stretch out of their traditional roles in feeding and caring for children and the elderly and assume financial responsibility for doing so.

6

DIVERSE ACTORS WITHIN THE FOOD MARKET: SURVIVAL & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The roles and positions that workers assume within food systems are diverse. The informal sector's heterogeneous group of microenterprises may include self-employed street vendors who work on own account in public places (like sidewalks along the main roads) (Kariuki, 2022) and their workplaces may be mobile or stationary in wooden booths (*kibanda*), street and market stands, or kiosks (*duka*). Nairobi City County's Trade Licensing Act of 2019 lists nine categories of trade licenses affecting informal traders; however, Owuor (2020, p. 14) notes that "only 15% of the sampled vendors indicated that they paid trade licences and permits to Nairobi City County to operate their businesses" and

KNBS (2016) recognises that some *mama mbogas* are formally registered and pay tax, but most food vendors in informal settlements operate outside public tax regimes.

Though most participants joined the informal economy out of a need to survive (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023), a group of "opportunistic" entrepreneurs have joined the "survivalists" in the informal economy (Owuor, 2020). Owuor (2020) and his team argue for an inclusive growth perspective, knowing the sector is diverse and heterogeneous with a large network of actors (e.g., supplier, broker, vendors, wholesalers) with differing capacities.

The food system of Nairobi is characterised by unequal distribution, limited access to cash resources, high food losses, extreme marginalisation, and spatial, economic, social, and political fragmentation—not the shortage of goods *per se*. The insufficient supply of food, especially fresh fruit and vegetables, for the urban poor is the consequence. The Covid pandemic and its curfews, mobility restrictions, and lockdowns further exposed the existing structural crisis of

food insecurity in informal settlements by impeding informal trade (Paganini & Khan, 2023; Kimani-Murage et al., 2022). Lockdowns restricted informal trading leaving households to grapple with food insecurity. The informal system was exposed as crucial to the functioning of high-density informal settlements as a direct source of income for households and for supply of food, aptly referred to as “trading to eat” (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023, p. 100).



Figure 6 Storage boxes at a vegetable vendor in Viwandani - the importance of appropriate post-harvest handling, logistics and storage facilities.
Source: C. Sonntag, 2023

7

STATE ROLE IN AND RESPONSE TO INFORMALITY

The Right to Food is a stand-alone right in the Constitution of Kenya (2010), “however, the lack of supporting legal frameworks hampers the implementation” (Bassermann & Sikobi, 2023, p. 3). The informal economy relies on the constitution as the “supreme legal document upon which regulatory

frameworks are supported” as well as five sets of labour laws that serve as guiding principles (Otieno 2018, p. 6). However, a strong recognition of the terminology ‘informal traders, vendors or sector’ is missing from these laws. Hence, highly relevant is the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood) Bill of 2021 which states:

The objects of this Act are to provide a standard framework – (a) to entrench the right to informal trading; (b) for the regulation of informal trading including areas for the conduct of such trade and licensing by counties; (c) for the designation and use of public space for informal trading; (d) for the effective organization and regulation of informal traders; and (e) for public participation in the designation of vending zones and regulation of informal traders.

Republic of Kenya, 2021, p. 108

THE RIGHT TO FOOD IS A STAND-ALONE RIGHT IN THE CONSTITUTION OF KENYA (2010), “HOWEVER, THE LACK OF SUPPORTING LEGAL FRAMEWORKS HAMPERS THE IMPLEMENTATION”

Bassermann & Sikobi, 2023, p. 3

In effort to support small and micro businesses (like informal street vendors), the Kenyan government launched a loan programme, called the Hustler Fund, in 2022. While undoubtedly a good idea, the fund has yet to produce long-lasting improvements for borrowers and has attracted criticism over, for example, small loan amounts and its contribution to debt traps (Gachenge, 2023; Otieno, 2022).

Despite the presence of the above-mentioned supportive legal frameworks and funding, informal traders are regarded with ambiguous and inconsistent attitudes from state institutions in Kenya. Their response to informal activities ranges from tacit acceptance and tolerance to penalisation and criminalisation (often leading to forced evictions and relocations) (Riisgaard et al., 2023). Typically, their efforts in the informal economy focus on formalisation and regulation of enterprises (including own-account workers) and rarely consider the formalisation of employment (Riisgaard et al., 2023). Although formalisation strategies are adhered to by the government, their efforts to formalise are often ineffective and do not reach those who are informally employed. This challenges modernisation theorists' assumptions that the informal economy will disappear when a country achieves an advanced state of economic development (Riisgaard et al., 2023).

Regulation of Kenya's food system is a complex affair. Brown (2019) calls

for “planning for less”, in terms of state regulation of the food system. For example, Kenya's food safety and quality policies are embedded in over 20 legislations and implemented by multiple agencies (Gema & Wesonga, 2022) and nine different trade licence categories exist via the Nairobi City County's Trade Licensing Act of 2019, leading to fragmentation and confusion. Many traders argue for clear regulation and more direct support navigating the convoluted administrative landscape of licences, stand fees, security, and bribery. Rather than providing support to informal vendors as they navigate this landscape, government authorities have been accused of hindering the process.

The *Kanjo Kingdom* (a Sheng term for city council or county inspectorate officers) is/was a well-known extortion ring run by officers of the Nairobi City County's Inspectorate Department (Africa Uncensored, 2016). Under this illegal scheme, city officials restrict hawkers' trade activity by demanding undocumented fines (bribes), seizing and burning hawkers' goods, beating them, and/or arresting them (possibly in the hopes of attaining higher bail payments once in police custody). Africa Uncensored footage coincides with Lindehan's statement that “Poor vendors, with no market space left to trade in, take to the streets, are assaulted by police, arrested, oppressed by taxes, fines, and persistently harassed” (2015, p. 327). The current governor of Nairobi City County, Johnson Arthur Sakaja, has taken a hard stance against Kanjo harassment and has remained adamant in his will to put a stop to it (Omulo, 2022). Despite movement toward change, it remains clear that “the needs and rights of these informal workers are not safeguarded by legal or social protections, leading to constant expulsions from the city” (Linehan, 2015, p. 325).

8

REPRESENTATION AND SUPPORT OF INFORMAL TRADERS IN ASSOCIATIONS

Most informal workers in Kenya are excluded from social protection services (e.g., health insurance), even though 33% of them voluntarily contribute to social protection schemes (Riisgaard et al., 2023). With over half of Nairobi's residents (55%) living below the international poverty line (Brown, 2015), lack of social protection programming creates vulnerability. While, in theory, those employed by the informal sector could access social protection insurance schemes, for the most part, those schemes are designed to meet the needs of those formally employed. It is for these reasons that international acceptance of the need to extend social protection coverage to informal workers is a growing concern (Riisgaard et al., 2023). As a local response to this lack of protection, nearly 50% of vendors have become members of small informal

associations, which appear to best function when they are inclusive and decentralised (Riisgaard et al., 2023). Despite their limited financial resources and scope, many associations operate loans and savings programmes that provide their members with support in the event of maternity, illness or death, and (sometimes) loss of employment (Kariuki, 2022).

Informal traders face many challenges (Kariuki, 2022) despite serving a critical role in food security and the right to food, so representation of their craft is of critical importance (Riisgaard et al., 2023). Yet, informal workers are rarely recognised by formal institutions, meaning the “key vehicles for representation and voice are the informal workers’ own associations or federations” (Riisgaard et al., 2023, p.

19). However, vendor associations often devote their focus to protection schemes like loans and savings programmes and rarely fully realise their potential to serve as a unified lobbying voice and truly represent their members (Riisgaard et al., 2023). The exception to this is vendor associations that belong to larger umbrella institutions, for instance, the Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT). KENASVIT has a greater capacity and mandate to take on important representative tasks, for example negotiating “access to trading spaces, evictions, confiscations, fines, and harassment” (Riisgaard et al., 2023, p. 17). Additionally, the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) in Kenya has produced limited signs of unionisation for better representation and voice for

informal traders in Kenya (Riisgaard et al., 2023). Small, local associations have enjoyed less success in lobbying and advocacy as a result of capacity gaps in leadership, management, growth planning, and finances. For example, a food vendors association formed in 2013 by 700 members from informal settlements in Korogocho, Viwandani, Mathare, Huruma, Mukuru, and Kibera shrank in membership, geographical coverage, and power and currently operate in a limited number of areas (Githiri et al., 2016). Future entry points for food vendor associations might capitalise on existing organisations’ experience in management and from established *chamas*’ (self-help groups) experience in functions such as social protection, savings programmes, and business development.



Figure 7 Vendor is cooking food over fire in Mukuru kwa Reuben.
Source: Akiba Mashinani Trust, 2023

9

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS: INCOME GENERATION, CASH TRANSFERS, AND SAVINGS

The availability of food in Nairobi is much less of a problem than its affordability. Cash income is key for urban households' food security because lack of access to land means that most food consumed in these areas is mostly purchased (Paganini & Weigelt, 2023). Vendors service areas when households have both demand for products and funds to purchase them. Yet, generating income for gaining access to food is a major challenge for the urban poor in informal settlements.

Recognising the importance of cash income, issues of food access versus availability, and urban agriculture's limited impacts in informal settlements, Brown (2019, p. 363) states:

Because urban food security relies so heavily on access, as opposed to availability, increasing production through urban agriculture has marginal impact for those living in informal settlements. Rather than expanding such productivist responses, social protection in the form of cash transfers and supporting the informal food sector emerge as more promising focus areas.

**THE AVAILABILITY OF FOOD IN
NAIROBI IS MUCH LESS OF A PROBLEM
THAN ITS AFFORDABILITY.**

Various studies have shown that national and international cash transfer programmes are effective ways of

improving income and food security for vulnerable households in crisis (Brown, 2019; Owuor et al., 2017). Cash transfer programmes are lauded for their large potential to ensure food security, especially when paid to women and in reaction to and prevention of crises (Brown, 2019). As a majority of women living in informal settlements (60%) are involved in the informal sector and are decision makers in household food planning and preparation, the impact of cash transfers on household food security could be significant as all informal traders could profit from such programming twice: directly as vulnerable households and indirectly via trade.

For example, in 2009, Oxfam GB and Concern Worldwide established a three-year cash transfer and skills development project targeting residents of urban informal settlements. Under the project, targeted households in Mukuru and Korogocho informal settlements received 1,500 Kenyan shillings (~\$19 USD in 2009) per month through mobile money transfer (*M-PESA*). This initiative had a lasting positive effect on the nutritional status of residents following the food crisis of 2007/2008 (Owuor et al., 2017). In a further effort to increase cash income and, thus, food access, the Kenyan government launched the *Kazi Mtaani* social protection programme with the twin objectives of creating youth employment and cleaning the environment (tree planting and street cleaning) by offering youth in informal settlements paid employment during the Covid epidemic (Kimani-Murage et al., 2023). Despite positive reviews (including from the World Bank (2020)), the project was abolished in 2022.

Though Kenyan social protection spending is increasing, it is still low

by international standards (Owuor et al., 2017). Indeed, Owuor's large-scale survey of informal vendors noted that "only 25 (2%) of the interviewed informal food vendors had accessed government support schemes, such as the Youth Fund, Uwezo Fund, Women Enterprise Fund, and M-Akiba" (Owuor, 2020, p. 30). Instead of relying on formal social protection, informal vendors access "informal financial services afforded by being members of *chamas*" (Battersby et al., 2022, p. 36), keep funds at home, and make regular deposits to "M-Pesa or M-Shwari (mobile phone) accounts, merry-go-round (*chamas*) accounts, and savings and credit co-operatives (SACCO) accounts" (Owuor, 2020, p. 30).

Understanding why interventions are not working, accepted, or known by informal traders and why they have been abolished by government despite successes is key to developing future interventions. For example, Riisgaard et al. (2023) found that informal workers could not access Universal Health Coverage 'Supacover social protection programming' because their lack of formal registration precluded them from qualification. A hurdle that the much-debated health laws that the Kenyan Government signed in October 2023 are intended to address. Riisgaard et al. (2023) further comment on universal old-age pension in Kenya and Zanzibar and basic income as an alternative to standard social policy and attest to the growing consensus on the need for inclusive or even universal social insurance. Grözinger and Djateng (2023) present efforts around basic income and direct cash transfer programmes in Namibia, Brazil, and Kenya. However, the early realisation of such methods is more than questionable in Kenya and government funding seems impossible in the current situation.

10

NEW ACTORS AND ICT: REVOLUTION- ISING THE MARKET?

Closely linked to food affordability and access is the lack of physical infrastructure and efficient logistics within rural–peri-urban–urban food supply linkages (e.g., markets, storage, handling, post-harvest losses, transport) (Coe et al., 2008). Organisation of intermediary linkages and transportation need to be more efficient to ensure a more decentralised supply of products to all people in the metropolitan region of Nairobi (Sonntag & Kulke, 2021). A vibrant, innovative, and creative start-up culture has responded to these needs in Nairobi, sending entrepreneurs scrambling to fill programming gaps and create dynamic and flexible solutions to urban food

system challenges. A popular option has been in using digital infrastructure (e.g., provision of transparent market information and linking retail to intermediaries and producers) rendering bribing, corruption, and nepotism more challenging. Here, we highlight a few of the many programmes and companies that amplify the efforts of informal actors increasing food security in informal settlements.

- *Kwanza Tukule* is an innovative and successful Kenyan company that supplies food (dry foods, flour, and cereals) to street food vendors to reduce purchase prices by taking advantage of economies of scale, digital technologies, mobile payments, and effective logistics.
- The agri-tech giant *Twiga Foods* simplifies the complex structure of food supply chains by using technology (web application) to connect registered (small-scale) farmers and vendors (Ghosh et al., 2020). The removal of middlepersons

CLOSELY LINKED TO FOOD AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS IS THE LACK OF PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND EFFICIENT LOGISTICS WITHIN RURAL–PERI-URBAN–URBAN FOOD SUPPLY LINKAGES.

IN 2022, THE GOVERNMENT INITIATED A MAJOR UNDERTAKING TO EQUIP MARKETS WITH 25,000 FREE WIFI HOTSPOTS TO IMPROVE THE ACTIVITIES OF MARKET PLAYERS AND ENABLE E-COMMERCE.

via the app theoretically allows farmers to secure guaranteed sales at higher prices and allows vendors access to high-quality products at lower and more stable prices. The B2B e-commerce food distribution platform claims that over 100,000 Kenyan customers use its services, and it moves more than 600 metric tons of product to 10,000+ retailers daily (Kene-Okafor, 2021). *Twiga Foods* has, however, been criticised for asymmetrical access to supply chains due to production limitations (unpublished interview work) and for recent massive layoffs, land purchases for own-production, and controversial linkage to the government's Hustler Fund (Moturi, 2023).

- *Farm to Feed* is an innovative social entrepreneurship that minimises food losses by rescuing food and marketing surplus at low prices, attracting informal traders who have low purchasing power.
- *Food Banking Kenya* is also working on reducing food losses and waste, rescuing food, and reintegrating it into the market for consumption.
- *Sukhiba Connect* is an AI-enabled commerce platform on WhatsApp that maximises economies of scale by facilitating bulk purchases through connecting buyers and integrating marketing, delivery routing, wallet management, and payment processes.

- *SokoFresh* offers technical solutions for logistics and post-harvest losses, such as cooling as a service to increase shelf life and reduce prices.

As many of these innovations rely on digital infrastructure, it is important to note that internet and data are still often inaccessible to the urban poor. In 2022, the government initiated a major undertaking to equip markets with 25,000 free WiFi hotspots to improve the activities of market players and enable e-commerce (Mwangi, 2022). Similarly, lack of access to physical infrastructure (e.g., stands, water, roads, storage, and cooling facilities) often restrict the activity and function of the informal market.

As Kenya's government turns its attention to the promotion of food security within urban informal settlements, an opportunity for revalorising informality has emerged. Rather than demonising and criminalising informal activity, a differentiated analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of informality in terms of its ability to care for poor Kenyans and respond to their needs through a functioning urban food system is needed. After all, the current ruling party in Kenya operates under the slogan "*Kazi ni Kazi*" (work is work) and "all hustles matter". Strengthening vendors organisation, infrastructure, and governance engagement are crucial steps in making sure that informal vendors' hustles matter and their work remains as viable work that nourishes the nation.

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