Urban Commons

Community kitchens, saving schemes and school feeding programmes

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Cities are financial hubs of privatised, commercialised, or state-controlled spaces, both physical and virtual (for example, social media groups). Food commons in urban areas emerge in reaction to and in struggle with multiple factors: they are enacted in saturated or contested spaces, densely populated, and shaped by competing uses of financial investment.

One of the pathways we explore is the potential urban commons hold as spaces for social cohesion and nutrition justice. Elinor Ostrom defines commons as threefold comprising resources, people, and the governance processes - communing. We explore the processes of communalising, in which resources are not distributed on the basis of price (market) or government agencies (state), but by self-organised communities who negotiate and renegotiate rules for collaboration and sharing.

The shock of COVID-19 turned social networks into the capital of the poor that saw community kitchens and saving schemes as a primary coping strategy.

Urban commons are not static hubs but spaces undergoing dynamic processes of commoning, i.e. a debating, changing, adapting, coping community of people faced by competing pressures and changing demands for their urban lands.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

DEFINITION

The right to food is a basic human right that is protected under international human rights and humanitarian law, and in various national constitutions. The right is not only a fundamental human right but a dynamic issue that is不断 evolving and shaped by a number of different interpretations, which impact the ways in which the work of the kitchen and feeding schemes are understood.

Food security exists when all people at all times have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs, and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO 2001). In light of these critiques, the High Level Panel of Experts produced a report in 2020 which added two new dimensions to the existing four dimensions - agency and sustainability.

Agency is defined as “the capacity of individuals and groups to exercise a degree of control over their own circumstances and to provide meaningful input into governance processes” (Clapp et al 2022, 3). These additions fundamentally re-frame food security and its politics. By including Agency, the accessibility dimension is transformed. In linking accessibility to agency, the assumptions within dominant food security of access being predominantly market-oriented is challenged. The emergent discourse is therefore about the ways in which food system transformation can work towards increasing access in ways that increases and strengthens the autonomy of the people involved.

LEARNING FROM THE SITE VISITS

- COMMUNITY KITCHENS IN THE CAPE FLATS
  The tide of COVID-19 related measures such as lockdowns exacerbated the plethora of societal and economic challenges faced by the urban poor. Across Cape Town, soup kitchens mushroomed in lower income neighbourhoods. They served long lines of hungry neighbours who had lost jobs and pay cheques, and could no longer afford putting food on the table.

- COMMUNITY KITCHEN IN MUKURU
  Without notice, bulldozers accompanied by a police unit drove into the slum on October 2021. What followed was agony for residents as their homes and business premises were allegedly flattened to clear a road construction path. As of December 2021, at least three people had been killed, and almost 19,000 were left homeless.

Since the 1990s, residents of the 689-acre Mukuru Informal Settlements Belt have lived under the constant threat of violent evictions such as the ones carried out last year. In 2017, the County Government of Nairobi stepped in by declaring part of the settlement a Special Planning Area (SPA). Besides providing a budget to improve social services in the slums, the declaration also gave residents security of tenure. However, this SPA protection only covered a tiny fraction of the slum area.

The aim in Mukuru is to establish a kitchen that adequately addresses the food and nutritional needs of their community; to have a kitchen that serves as a launchpad for other socio-economic initiatives, including businesses like catering services, and to use the kitchens as a pathway towards recovering the ability to feed themselves.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can the kitchens become financially sustainable and not rely on the costs of unpaid labour of Black women who cook from their own pockets?
- How can we document the missing elements (unpaid labour, financial resource transfers, social networks)?
- What policy measures are required to implement these visions?
- What are the impediments to building a political voice of collective food providers?
- What political voice/ influence over food system decisions do they currently have?
- How can people who come to the kitchen help to transform from feeding schemes to community development?