

Urban Commons

Community kitchens, saving schemes and school feeding programmes

TEP 2

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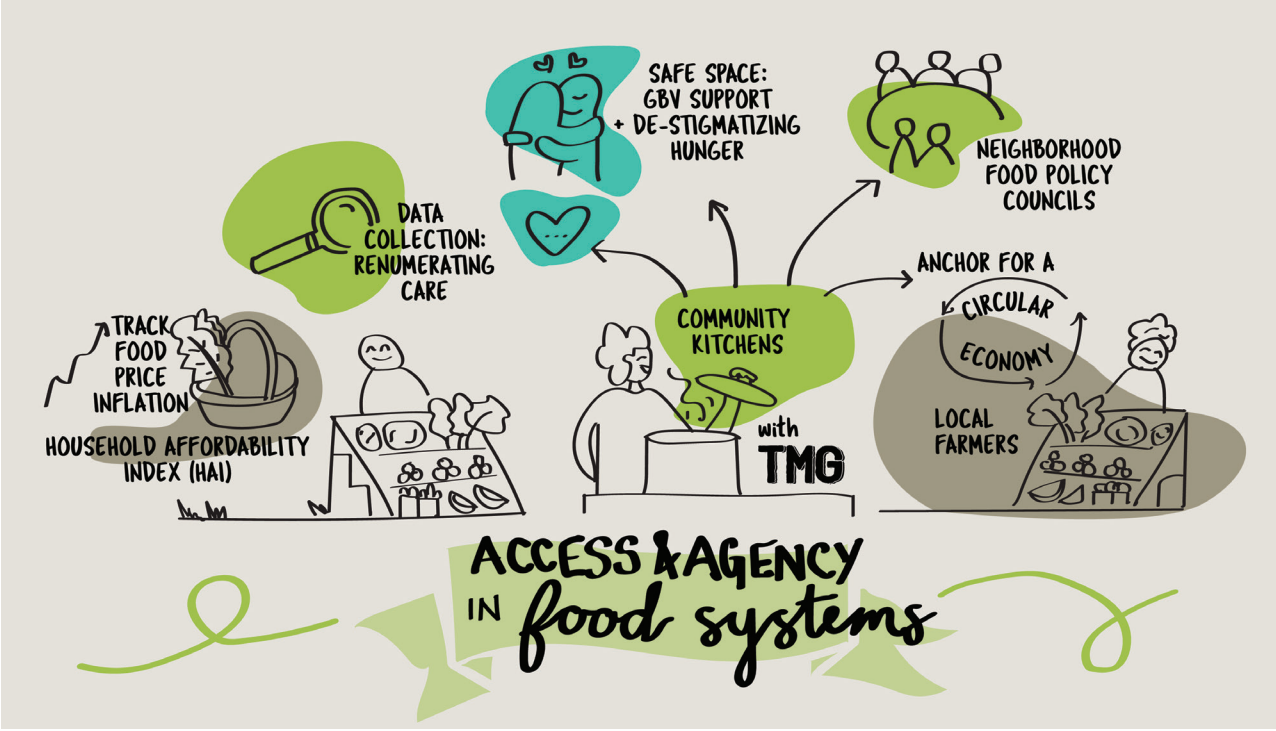
Cities are financial hubs of privatised, commercialised, or state-controlled spaces, both physical and virtual (for example, social media groups). Food commons in urban areas emerge in reaction to and in struggle with multiple factors: they are enacted in saturated or contested spaces, densely populated, 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 process - commoning. We explore the processes of commoning, 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 pressure 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 – including that of South Africa and Kenya. However, the nature of this right, its relationship to other complementary rights and the mechanisms by which this right is to be achieved has a number of different interpretations, which impact the ways in the work of the kitchens 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-orientated 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 exercises agency.

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.



The Photovoice methodology encourages feminist approaches in food security to unearth the root causes of broken systems and power struggles, and amplify marginalised voices normally excluded in mainstream food security research. Twenty women reflect on photos collected during site visits.

LEARNING FROM THE SITE VISITS

- From a transformation perspective, this work will reflect on how community kitchens could open spaces for the re-imagining of unjust food systems and unpack power relations that shape urban planning in post-apartheid cities in South Africa. Kitchens could be spaces from which communities seek and gain connection, exchange, and solidarity.
- Food is an identity and collective culture, which is often manifested in (unpaid) care work mostly provided by women in gardens, kitchens, and feeding schemes. Federici's work describes these hubs as places of transformation where the production and processing of food in urban spaces is commonised and organised by a community that equally decides and benefits. She describes the idea of commons as a feminist concept as a way of resistance and reorganisation in times of social injustice and ecological crisis. Kitchens are run by women, most of them are unpaid. Most of the kitchens rely on donations or fundraising by women. The main challenges are lack of space and funds for food, water electricity, and the women's own exhaustion.

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 Makuru 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.



Women started to establish a community kitchen to address hunger in evicted settlements

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can the kitchens become financially but also socially sustainable and not on the costs of unpaid labour of Black women who cook from their own pockets?
- How do 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 kitchens help to transform from feeding schemes to community development?

