

Crafting systemic responses to strengthen the informal sector's contribution to food security

Highlights of Urban Food Futures
Nairobi Policy Event

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Summary

From 29-30 March 2023, TMG and convened a policy event in Nairobi, following a similar session in Cape Town in November 2022. The aim was to bring together key County decision makers with research and civil society actors to agree on how to implement concrete pathways to tackle persistent hunger and related crises of urban poor.

The discussions built on the outcomes of a 1.5 year scoping research phase, contained in a recently published report that explores five pathways toward the progressive realization of the right to food in low- income urban areas. With funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), TMG and partners in the two cities investigated the impact of the crisis on vulnerable households and jointly explored various community-based solutions to address immediate hunger and build resilience to external shocks.

The Nairobi event drew high-level representatives from seven County departments, as well as the national ministry of agriculture. They included the County Executive Committee Member (Minister) for Green Nairobi, the Chief Officer, County Health, Wellness and Nutrition, and the Director for Donor Coordination and Stakeholder Engagement. Other representatives came from departments responsible for Business and Hustler opportunities, and Urban Renewal & Housing. More than 80 participants attended discussions over the two days.

The following is a recap of discussions over the two days, which were moderated by Boniface Kiteme, Director, Centre for Training and Integrated Research in ASAL Development (CETRAD), Kenya.

Opening Session

Serah Kiragu-Wissler, TMG, welcomed participants and noted that beyond presenting the results of the scoping phase, the event aimed to facilitate a shared understanding of the role of the informal sector as a lever to progressively realize the right to food. She said the discussions would define roles and responsibilities of key food system actors in driving food system transformation.

Jane Weru, Akiba Mashinani Trust/Muongano Alliance, provided a brief overview of the scoping research carried out in Mukuru informal settlement. She painted a stark picture of how communities in the settlement experience hunger, stating she has witnessed children eating fermented barley grains - by-products of distilling alcohol.

Weru expressed her hope that the new phase of the project will identify new ideas to ensure that all children of Mukuru will have food to eat and have a better future.



Image 1 | Jane Weru, Akiba Mashinani Trust

Serah Kiragu-Wissler stressed that food and nutrition security policies must be fundamentally rethought from the perspective of those experiencing hunger and food insecurity. She explained that TMG’s action research approach contributes to this by co-developing social innovations with communities who are directly affected. This not only ensures a focus on identifying immediate needs for food and material support, but also the underlying structural inequities and how to bridge this gap.

Dominic Mwenja, Miramar Foundation, outlined how his organization co-developed an adapted hydroponic agriculture installation at a community centre in Mukuru Kwa Ruben to test the feasibility of producing fresh food to supply surrounding informal schools, food vendors associations, and emerging community kitchens in the area. He explained that the results of this pilot offer clear proof that “we as a team have innovative solutions to feed our people,” which can contribute to food system transformation at county and higher levels.

Kefa Omanga, Director for Donor Coordination and Stakeholder Engagement, Office of the Governor, Nairobi County, underscored the importance of food and nutrition security as a connecting thread across more than 14 government functions. He noted that Kenya’s constitution recognizes universally endorsed social and economic rights, especially the right to adequate and acceptable quality of food. With Nairobi’s population currently estimated at 5.5 million – more than 10 percent of the total Kenyan population, Omanga reiterated the County’s responsibility to identifying lasting solutions for low-income populations by focused on delivering capacity for households to produce their own food.



Image 2: Kefa Omanga introduces high-level County officials attending the policy event

In her keynote address, Maureen Njeri, County Executive Committee Member (Minister), Green Nairobi, outlined the diverse and interlinked challenges that the County faces in realizing the right to food and decent livelihoods for the majority of its 5 million citizens, 60% of who live in informal settlements. Highlighting extreme land scarcity and insecure tenure, poor waste management, and associated pollution of water and soils as key barriers, she highlighted recent revisions to zoning regulations to recognize agricultural production as a distinct land use in urban areas. She presented the new school feeding programme as one of the flagship projects of the new county administration, with a key goal of establishing a centralized kitchen in each of the 17 sub-counties.

Njeri emphasized that many of the proposed actions require close inter-departmental collaboration to link food security to a range of other social inclusion and environmental goals, such as the establishment of fruit trees and multistorey gardens in urban neighbourhoods, sustainable management of food waste, and creating livelihood opportunities across the agri-food value chain.



Image 3: Minister Maureen Njeri

Acknowledging that as a city, “we have a long way to go,” Njeri concluded by reiterating the county’s commitment to foster closer ties with development partners working in relevant sectors and credited the Department of Donor Coordination for being instrumental in bringing these actors together.

From crises response to pathways of urban food system transformation

Insights from Nairobi and Cape Town

Introducing substantive discussions on Wednesday morning, Nicole Paganini, Programme Coordinator, Urban Food Futures, sketched out the genesis of the programme and key insights from the scoping phase. She noted the programme's grounding in the overall research question: *How to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on food security so that immediate needs are addressed and – at the same time – that immediate responses to the crisis also contribute to the transformation of urban food systems?* She said that TMG and partners seek to contribute to concrete solutions to this question by co-developing social innovations with those most affected by hunger and malnutrition.



Image 4: Nicole Paganini unveiling the Scoping Report ahead of the event.

[Download the report here](#)

Paganini described how TMG's methodology aims to make connections at different levels: between those with lived experience in urban low-income areas and their representative organizations and governments; and embedding this work in relevant global processes, such as regular reviews of

implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 2 (zero hunger) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities).

Jane Weru noted that by 2050 half of all Kenyans will be living in urban centres, hence the urbanization pathways embarked on today “will determine how this country thrives or fails.” She gave the example of education in Mukuru informal settlement where only six of an estimated 150 schools are state-funded and hence eligible for the County’s school-feeding programme. She urged all actors to make conscious efforts to roll out basic services in order to tap the huge youth dividend. Among other issues of concern, she highlighted food safety concerns in urban farming and informal food markets where food quality is compromised by poor water and sanitation infrastructure and waste management. Weru further noted that while the five transformation pathways explored by the project represent what partners consider to be the key intervention areas for further action research and implementation, some open questions remain. One such question is how to meaningfully work with informal sector actors to bridge the very real gaps that exist, notably the continued exclusion of the bulk of informal schools from the government’s school feeding programme.

In the panel discussion that followed, Nicole Paganini pointed that behind the many different types of numbers, “there are stories, experiences and humans.” Stressing that the poor want food, not theories, she said that transforming urban food systems requires understanding the root causes of hunger and social exclusion and working beyond silos to build more resilient and socially inclusive cities.

Discussing some of the overall lessons learnt from the research phase, the panel highlighted:

- ▶ Valuable experience gained on how to bring together different sectors to jointly work towards a shared goal.
- ▶ The importance of applying a local lens in understanding global challenges within the local questions.
- ▶ The need to confront some uncomfortable questions around the feasibility and scope of proposed interventions and pathways, which requires building trust to strengthen synergies and collaboration across sectors and actors.
- ▶ The importance of defining a clear role and exit strategy for support organizations to encourage local ownership and ensure that communities in informal settlements have the requisite technical capacities and social capital to drive lasting change.

The informal sector as a lever to progressively realize the right to food

The second segment of the panel discussion opened with the story of Stella, a mama mboga (female food trader) in Mukuru. She recounted a typical day for her, which starts at 2 am with a with a 2-hour trip to purchase green vegetables at Muthurwa wholesale market, leaving her young child alone. In addition to the physical risks that she and her daughter face, she barely makes enough money to meet her basic needs after a long day, despite selling vegetables at her roadside kiosk until the evening hours. She concluded that despite these many challenges, informal traders have limited livelihood options and hence are forced to take these risks each day.

Bringing perspectives from Cape Town, Sanelisiwe Nyaba, FACT, underscored the “social currency” that is present when communities come together to respond to a crisis through such initiatives as community kitchens. Beyond meeting immediate needs, she highlighted the added value of kitchens in strengthening community voice and facilitating critical dialogue processes to identify solutions to other important challenges. Nyaba further noted that while kitchens had different entry points due to the immediate challenges they aimed to address, this very diversity enables different communities to learn from each other in order to respond better to other emerging challenges, such as gender-based violence or child nutrition.



Image 5: Stella describes a typical day for an informal food vendor

During general discussion, strong interest was expressed in further unpacking the lessons learnt to inform diverse food system initiatives that are currently underway across civil society, government and private sectors. One



Image 6: Sanelisiwe Nyaba provides perspectives from Cape Town

participant from Maseno University in western Kenya, for example, expressed interest in adopting a similar action research approach to provide input to food sector policies and programmes being developed by Kisumu County.

A community-based human rights activist challenged government representatives to face up to the broader health and social costs of food insecurity and hunger, especially among children. Giving the example of repeated hospitalization of children in one household due to malnutrition, she asked: “What can we do to prevent parent to go back to hospital with the same problem?”

Other issues raised included how to link the county’s centralized kitchens masterplan to local realities, with one speaker asking whether due consideration, for example, is being paid to the need for a “unique kitchen” for Mukuru. One community participant asked how to manage issues of water quality and scarcity to ensure that proposed hydroponic agriculture installations and community kitchens can function optimally. Issues of trust, and how these deter alliance building at the local level, were also highlighted.

Drawing comparative experiences from Cape Town, Nomonde Buthelezi, Coordinator of TMG partner Food Agency Cape Town (FACT) stressed the importance of breaking the ceiling to have duty bearers at county level engage in a more constructive way with communities? She pondered what plan of action is needed to work in order to bring this about. unison with duty bearers?

The Mukuru Special Planning Area (SPA) process, which was driven by a partnership of more than 40 organizations, with a strong contribution from AMT/Muungano Alliance, was highlighted as a good example of how the county is starting to engage local stakeholders in a systematic way.

On the sustainability of the Urban Food Futures project, Paganini acknowledged the need to develop robust indicators of successful innovation that can be further adopted and scaled.



Image 7: TMG and partners at an Urban Food Futures workshop with Mukuru community members

Through their honest portrayals of the plight faced by informal food traders, speakers also challenged the government narrative about the availability of training, financing, and other resources for the informal sector that are currently not being tapped. Many spoke of the constant business losses and personal risks that traders encounter at the hands of violent county enforcers (“kanju”), alluding to the role of organized cartels and vested interests that drive such harassment. As one vendor put it, “... in informal settlements if we speak the truth of the matter its like we’re in a different world, even the County government has little power.”

In his concluding remarks, Moderator Kiteme said the session had “touched a nerve.” He lauded the contributions of mama mbogas and other community participants for expressing themselves freely to high-level officials.

Wrapping up the day's discussions, Mary Muthoni, AMT/Muongano Alliance noted the acknowledgement by county representatives that major challenges exist in securing food and other basic services for citizens. Highlighting possible entry points for linking ongoing county-level initiatives to the five food system transformation pathways identified during the scoping phase, Jes Weigelt highlighted a number of take aways for policy:

1. Applying a standard design to different contexts, bound to result in failure. Every solution we propose needs to fit in the context for which it will be implemented.
2. Governments have a lot to benefit from the energy and enthusiasm of the informal sector. This does not mean "formalizing" the informal sector, but rather creating an enabling environment in which solutions from the informal sector can emerge and flourish.
3. For food policies are to be successful they must be designed from the perspective of those who are food insecure. This also creates the entry point to hold duty bearers accountable for implementing the right to food and other human rights as set out in the constitution.
4. It is important to put in place systematic mechanisms that link duty bearers to rights holders so that communities can transmit their ideas and concerns.
5. The experience of Mukuru highlights the scale of the challenge, which governments cannot address in isolation. The proposed Urban Nutrition Hubs could contribute to bridging the implementation gap by a living lab where communities, civil society organizations, private, academic and state actors can jointly explore, test, and incubate promising food system innovations.

Urban Nutrition Hubs

The second day of the policy event was dedicated to in-depth and parallel discussions on next steps in implementing the food system transformation pathways identified during the scoping phase.

Nicole Paganini opened the discussions by outlining the concept of Urban Nutrition Hubs as the entry point for the implementation phase of the Urban Food Futures programme. She defined Urban Nutrition Hubs as living labs that provide spaces for co-creating knowledge with local communities and other actors, and driving the implementation of the five programmatic pathways.

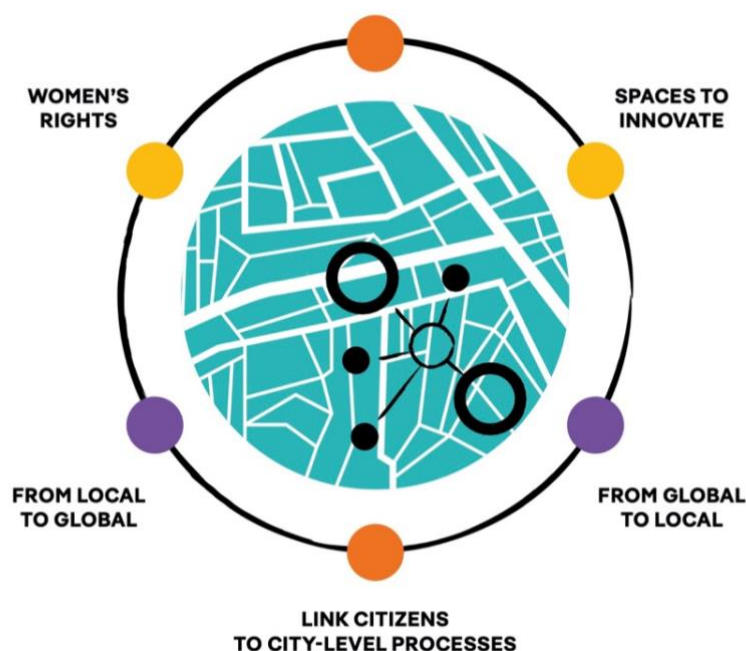


Figure 1: Our vision for Urban Nutrition Hubs

Gareth Haysom, African Centre for Cities, elaborated on a road system as a metaphor for food system transformation. Just as different road users on physical “pathways” must abide by rules of the road, the food system similarly needs to be safe and accessible to all, he said. He noted that this can only happen if policy makers move beyond the current focus on single solutions, such as food production, towards embracing multiple perspectives and rationalities.

Highlighting experience from Cape Town, he said this approach has led to a move away from attempting to design one overarching food strategy and instead identifying “where food sits” across diverse municipal and provincial mandates. This approach, he concluded, will ultimately lead towards conceptualizing urban food systems as a “mosaic” of actors and solutions, rather than contested spaces.



Image 8: Gareth Haysom, African Centre for Cities

TMG partners provided insights from pilot activities in Nairobi and Cape Town.

COPING WITH CRISES: Mary Wambui, AMT/Muongano Alliance, described the leadership displayed by women in the emergence of “kitchens of hope” in Mukuru informal settlement as a direct response to the Covid-19 crisis and violent evictions of thousands of residents. She said the community kitchen initially aimed to solve the immediate crisis of hunger by feeding at least 300 families each day. However, with the price of food doubling since the onset of the pandemic, and the community kitchen has evolved into an important knowledge sharing space for the women’s group to discuss how develop a sustainable business model that can provide affordable meals while also generating a livelihood for the kitchen staff. This, she concluded, would require conceptualizing the kitchens as more than just a source of food, but a place to aggregate other activities such as training on agricultural production, school feeding, and entrepreneurship and leadership skills.



Image 9: Members of the women's group that manages the Mukuru Community Kitchen with Mary Wambui (right)

RETHINKING FOOD PRODUCTION IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: Jedidah Mumbi Njege, Miramar International Foundation, described the process of setting up a hydroponic farming greenhouse in Mukuru. She noted that community representatives were fully involved in the entire process establishing the greenhouse, producing food, and allocating the produce to workers as well as the adjacent school and health facility. Beyond offering a feasible food production model, she highlighted added benefits of mobilizing and empowering local communities to achieve food self sufficiency. "I'm proud of myself," stated one of the women trained in hydroponic production by Miramar. As a single mother of five, she explained, she was motivated by the opportunity to produce food on a limited space as feeding her family has become increasingly difficult due to rising costs.

RE-VALORIZING INFORMALITY THROUGH COMMUNITY DIALOGUES:

Busi Selana, FACT, provided an overview of the food dialogues facilitated by FACT, noting that at their heart, they aimed destigmatize hunger by politicizing food insecurity and bringing local perspectives into food decision making processes. She explained that this process started with the realization that communities needed to start by “having our own conversations in different neighbourhoods to find solutions that we could bring forward.” She described how the Covid-19 crisis had provided the opportunity to revisit the longstanding issue of hunger, and to link it to emerging social issues such as lost livelihoods and a growing epidemic gender-based violence. By linking the dialogues to community-based action research, and questioning the glaring absence of local government in finding lasting solutions, these emerging community processes gained additional momentum and an opportunity to build bridges to relevant policy makers, she concluded.

Kicking off the discussion, Elizabeth Kimani-Murage, APHRC, underscored the importance of arriving at a shared understanding of the concept of food security and the Right to Food, especially for civil society actors who are key to holding governments accountable. She called for efforts to empower these actors from the ground up to engage their communities and policy makers.

Zipporah Mwangi, Nairobi County, encouraged these emerging initiatives to link up with available government funding and training opportunities in order to support local producers and traders to build sustainable businesses and expand their access to more diverse markets.



Image 10: A hydroponic agriculture installation showcased by Miramar during the event

Other issues highlighted in the discussions included:

- ▶ Inclusivity and dialogue are critical for sustaining these projects. In the case of CEA installations in Mukuru, the theft of expensive equipment in the early days of the project provided an opportunity to invest in more intensive engagement with the local community in order to enhance their ownership and sustainable management in the long term.
- ▶ The need for researchers and other actors to fully embed themselves in the communities in which they work to understand underlying barriers that drive food insecurity and social inequality. In the case of Cape Town, community dialogues completed this process by repackaging research results into a simplified “yellow book” with illustrations to communicate the root causes as well as impacts of food injustice and facilitate genuine community engagement in finding ways forward.
- ▶ Despite different starting points and contexts, exchanges between the programme partners in Cape Town and Nairobi has been instrumental in expanding perspectives and exploring a broader set of solutions. Within each urban context, this can be replicated through intra-community exchanges and mentorship by more established initiatives.
- ▶ The need to address broader issues such as food safety, water and sanitation, and climate action and create stronger links to other ongoing community-based initiatives, such as youth-run community kitchens, media,
- ▶ Recognize that subsidized community initiatives such as the CEA installations can negatively affect social cohesion as they might be viewed as undermining the livelihoods of informal vendors.
- ▶ As a critical actor in the agrifood system, the private sector needs to be better integrated in these emerging solutions, both as a source of technical solutions, funding, market exposure and diverse business models that can be adapted at different levels.

Invitation towards change

The Right to Food – from constitutional mandate into action

In a final fishbowl panel session, representatives from the county and national governments, and TMG partners discussed how to build a shared agenda to drive urban food system transformation moving forward.

The session explored who needs to be on board to achieve the right to food. County representatives highlighted the functions of various departments that touch on food security, including urban planning, public health, water and sanitation, environmental protection and social services. It was noted that a collaborative approach – such as proposed under the UNHs – offers an opportunity to build on ongoing efforts at county level to strengthen multisectoral collaboration across the agriculture, health, planning, environmental, business support and financing departments.

Discussing Cape Town's experience, Gareth Haysom noted the importance of ensuring buy in at the highest policy levels. He described the long process of evolving a food security strategy at provincial and city levels that was initially driven by the department of agriculture but eventually incorporated the City's resilience department, as well as the Office of the Premier, which has overall budgetary oversight.

The subsequent discussions revealed the many open questions that remain for building a more inclusive governance of food system transformation at different levels. The huge gap between the small number of schools and early childhood development centres benefitting from Nairobi's official school feeding programme and the much higher number of needy children locked out of the system was highlighted as one example of a critical governance and accountability gap. In response, Irene Muchoki, Nairobi County, stressed "we have to start somewhere," noting the huge financial burden of rolling out the programme county wide. She said the first phase will reach 300,000 children, with parallel efforts underway to explore additional funding and support to extend it to more schools. Alternative proposals noted the need to map existing initiatives by civil society and social enterprises and other actors to build a more accurate picture of where gaps persist and align efforts more effectively. While the idea of community kitchens was recognized as an emerging model, several participants pointed to limited knowledge about cost implications and the feasibility of building business models.

At the same time, several speakers stressed the importance of maintaining independent and critical voices – such as consumer organizations and other civil society actors – to hold government and other actors accountable.

Parallel workshops: Collaborative ways forward

Further focused discussions on four of the pathways to be explored in the second phase of the Urban Food Futures programme took place in smaller groups.

On coping with crises, the group highlighted the spontaneous emergence of community kitchens, urban agriculture and similar initiatives in the immediate wake of the Covid-19 crisis. While limited in scope, these emerging responses were seen as a natural starting point for building Urban Nutrition Hubs to explore how to aggregate more services, support, and collaboration. The importance of further efforts to amplify the voice of local communities was also noted, and the need to link this to diverse communication and mobilization channels targeted at youth, women, and other excluded groups, including community radio, social media and the arts.

The group addressing issues around mutual accountability highlighted the importance of not losing sight of the government’s role as “convenor of dialogues,” and characterized the strong representation from Nairobi County departments as a concrete expression of mutual accountability. Other accountability opportunities were highlighted, including implementation of the constitutionally mandated public participation act, and ongoing cross-sectoral initiatives at various governmental levels. Regarding challenges, the group highlighted remaining gaps related to: how to ensure contextual issues are addressed while maintaining focus on the big picture; continued failure to fully implement the Mukuru Special Planning Area outcome to ensure land tenure security for inhabitants; and remaining capacity challenges in engaging with local actors. In conclusion, the importance of language was noted, with a call to move from generic references to “stakeholders” to recognize the specific roles and responsibilities of duty bearers and rights holders in mutual accountability.

On rethinking production, the group stressed the importance of demystifying what it takes to produce food in informal settings by developing a range of options suited for urban realities of minimal space and limited access to water and soil. In addition to creating livelihood opportunities for youth and other

groups, the discussions highlighted untapped potential to strengthen resilience to climate change in urban and peri-urban settings.

The group discussing informal food flows reiterated the numerous challenges faced by vendors, including the critical role of trust in building alliances to amplify the voice of the informal sector vis a vis governance structures and corporate interests. The need for further work to explore cooperatives and other forms of organization was highlighted to enable vendors to benefit from training and financial support, aggregation of services, and a bigger say in decision making processes.



Image 11 & 12: Focus group discussion.



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