Green Vegetable Supply in Dar es Salaam

Marc Wegerif

Lingo on his bike selling mchicha. Photo by Marc Wegerif

This article constructs a picture of green vegetable growing and supply in Dar es Salaam by looking at the lives and work of a small trader and an urban farmer. It reveals the importance of a range of distribution and trade networks and the integration of a wider city region, alongside urban and periurban production, for the large-scale supply of these vegetables to urban eaters. The livelihood benefit for the many actors involved is clear as are some of the threats emerging as the city changes.

"Mchichooooooo", the booming voice rings out down the road, clearly audible from inside my house. Lingo is slowly cycling along, stopping when customers come out of their houses, a woven reed basket on the back of his bicycle loaded with green vegetables, including the ubiquitous mchicha (an amaranth leaf crop) that forms the core of his advertising call. He is also selling spinach, cassava leaves, pumpkin leaves, sweat potato leaves and mnafu (another green leafy crop). These vegetables are important in the diets of the majority of the more than 4 million residents of Dar es Salaam. At TZS 100 (Euro 0.05) a bunch, mchicha is one of the most affordable foods around, and delivered to your door daily it is also one of the most accessible. These crops are core to urban horticulture in Dar es Salaam. Flood valleys alongside rivers, larger periurban plots, and bits of ground not built on around the city are frequently found to include small fields of mchicha.

I join Lingo on his daily bicycle rounds through parts of Msasani and Masaki. He delivers to small restaurants and other regular customers, stops at cheaper apartment complexes such as those owned by the National Housing Cooperation, and sells mostly to domestic workers in these relatively wealthy areas.

Just after midday, Lingo has sold about two thirds of his 200 bunches of green leafy vegetables and heads home to take a rest. I join him and his family for a late lunch at 16:00. We are sitting on a mat on the porch of a six-room house, one of which he rents and shares with his wife and three children. There is a large metal tray loaded with ugali (maize porridge), a pot with cooked mnafo, small fried fish on a plastic plate and fried shrimps, wrapped in newspaper, from a street food vendor. His wife's younger sister is also eating with us, all from the same dishes. Lingo gives food to an old lady who lives in the same house. He adds fish and shrimps to her plate after she first takes only mnafo. I ask if they are related, and he explains that she rents another room in the same house – but "because we stay together I call her mama".

Ilala market. Photo by Marc Wegerif

A bit after 17:00 Lingo leaves home again, this time cycling straight to a spot on the side of the road where he sets out his remaining stock on two upturned tomato crates stored at a nearby house. He carefully rinses the vegetables and stacks them on the crates, talking to his neighbouring traders and passersby as he works. The road is a dirt track just wide enough for a car to pass, but very few do; it is used mostly by pedestrians, with a few bicycles, motorbikes and push carts. Lingo is sitting about 100 metres from the Mikoroshoni market and the street is lined with shops and street traders. A constant stream of people is passing by, many coming from work, some stopping and shopping. Lingo stays at the roadside until his remaining stock is sold: at 22:00. He aims to make a profit of TZS 20,000 (Euro 10) a day. On the days I have been with him he has gotten just a bit less than that.

What may seem like a humble business is of central importance for Lingo and his extended family. He worked for a few years in a shop in the city centre, but left to go back to doing his own business. His wife looks after the family and has no other income. Of great importance for Lingo is that his children get the education that he never got. His oldest son just finished primary school, and Lingo is saving for the cost of sending him to high school. When I ask what he likes about the work he says: "Business is my reason for being, it is my life".

The following morning before 6:00 I am at the garden where Lingo gets his mchicha. This is where his bicycle rounds start and it is less than a kilometre to where he sells on the roadside. I go through a gate and, although we are next to a busy main road, there is a sense of quiet calm. The land around the two four-storey apartment buildings is planted with mchicha.

Two women who turn out to be mother and daughter are harvesting mchicha, tying it into bunches with strips of palm leaf and stacking them to be ready for buyers. Mama plants and harvests 400–600 bunches of mchicha almost every day, rotating across 20 small plots all on the same piece of land. Selling this, she secures an income of TZS 28,000–40,000 (Euro 14–20) a day. She started in 1990 and has carried on ever since. Her husband resigned from his job in the mid-1990s and joined her in farming. They used to grow other green vegetables such as spinach as well, but due to building in the area they have less land now and only grow mchicha. During the heyday of their farming they branched out, building a house nearby to rent out, or to move into if they have to leave the apartment they still rent. They bought a *daladala*[1] and now also run a small liquor store, but the michicha

remains an important business that Mama Mchicha says she cannot stop. She has four children; the youngest is finishing high school this year and the others have finished high school and gone to college. The eldest has married and left home and the other three still live in the apartment surrounded by the urban farming that has supported them. That evening the son is in the field watering while listening to music on his smart phone. One daughter is not well, so she is sitting on a mat near the fields. The other daughter comes by smartly dressed, bible in hand, on the way to church. She says the mchicha farming "has a good profit. We work in the morning, then we can do some other things and come back and work in the evening".

Mama Mchicha buys seeds in Kariakoo, the main market area of Dar es Salaam, or from passing traders who come to her with seeds and other inputs. Growing seeds herself takes too long so it is not a good use of her small amount of land. The only fertiliser used is chicken manure from local urban chicken farmers, but she says there are not enough chicken farmers now. She rarely uses pesticide, only sometimes in the rainy season when there are many bugs. Water for irrigation comes from a natural spring; she also uses tap water although they have to pay for it. There is no payment for the land: "I use it, and I keep it clean" she says.

Mama Mchicha sells to Lingo and to a few other traders who buy about 100 bunches each a day for the lower price of around TZS 60 (Euro 0.03) a bunch. "I reduce the price because they collect in bulk, and afterwards we also got to know each other", says Mama Mchicha. She also loads a pushcart with about 100 bunches and walks around the neighbourhood herself, selling door to door for TZS 100 (Euro 0.05) a bunch.

Not all of Lingo's vegetables come directly from urban farmers. One morning I join him on his daily, half- hour *daladala* ride to the Ilala market. We enter the crowded, noisy streets next to the market buildings. Two lines of sellers are back to back in the middle of the road with narrow spaces, like congested aeroplane aisles, between them and two more lines of sellers on the outside edges of the road. Down side roads are more sellers and trucks offloading. "Cargo porters" are almost running through the crowd, shouting or making other noises of warning as they move, unstoppable, loaded with crates of tomatoes or sacks on their shoulders.

Lingo makes his way calmly through the throng. He talks to buyers and sellers that he knows, inspects spinach and other leaves and asks prices. He buys from different sellers, putting bunches into large plastic bags he brought with him. Most traders buy vegetables either from trucks that come overnight from Morogoro, Bagamoyo, Tanga and other regions that are hours (not days) away, or direct from farmers who bring to the market. The trucks, mostly the ten-ton Mitsubishi Fuso, are typically loaded with vegetables from a number of small farmers or traders, and the sale of the goods in Dar es Salaam is often facilitated by *dalalis* (agents) for a commission. Other traders go directly to farms in periurban areas – such as Kitunda, Kibaha and Kigamboni – and a few are farmers themselves, bringing their own crops from the same areas. It is not long before Lingo's bags are full and balanced on his head as he leads the way out of the market and back to the *daladalas*.

What Lingo and Mama Mchicha are doing is not unusual. Two other mchicha sellers, one on foot one on a bicycle, come to my street every day. They have similar sources of supply, one of them getting almost all the different green vegetables from farmers in periurban Kigamboni. People can also buy these vegetables from small vegetable stalls or from traders in the dozens of markets across the city, such as Mikoroshoni near where Lingo sells. Many of the traders at that market also go to Illala Market every morning and some to urban farms; a few of them grow for themselves.

Mchicha growing and trade is an important source of livelihoods for thousands in Dar es Salaam. Collectively, these peddlers – along with small farmers, traders and transporters in the regions – are supplying the city at scale. The trade networks reaching into the city region and distributing around the city ensure that the growers, urban and rural, can sell and that the city can eat. They also add economic and social value through the additional incomes generated.

The changing nature of the city and its demographics is bringing challenges. Mama Mchicha has lost land they used to farm as the area got built up, and the decrease in urban chicken farming is threatening her supply of manure. The same changes are affecting Lingo. As he explained it: "The people have left Masaki, they have gone, the foreigners have arrived and that is the reason business is now down." The Masaki area has the highest concentration of expatriates in Dar es Salaam who, along with some of the richer Tanzanians there, are eating less local foods, buying more from the few supermarkets, and keeping less chickens. This, along with a lack of urban planning and little protection for urban agriculture, is threatening the cycles of production and consumption that Lingo and Mama Mchicha have at once been part of and depended upon for decades.

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Note

1) The *daladala* is the main mode of public transport in Dar es Salaam They are privately owned, medium-size buses with no timetable, running set routes with government regulated fares.