



# Food in an Urbanised World: The role of city region food systems

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*Kampala, Uganda.* Photo by Pal Teravajimov/shutterstock.com

## Sustainable urbanisation and the food system

The challenge of food security is often framed as being one of feeding the growing human population of the world, but it is much more than just an issue of scale: the nature of the challenge is changing as well. The population has not just been increasing; it has shifted in character from being predominantly rural to becoming urban. In the latter half of the 20th century the world's urban population tripled in size and, for the first time in human history, more people now live in urban areas than in rural ones. It is expected that, by 2050, two thirds of the world's population will be living in urban areas.

Urbanisation has brought with it tremendous shifts in economic activity. It is also one of the predominant forces shaping food systems. These systems are becoming more globalised, with increasingly centralised networks involving fewer individual actors and supplying an increasing proportion of meat, dairy products and processed food.

In many countries, and for many people, the availability and choice of food is greater than ever before, and significant progress has been made on reducing hunger worldwide. Yet one in nine people still suffers from chronic undernourishment, half a billion people are obese, and one third of all food produced is lost or wasted. In addition, the ecosystem services upon which our food systems depend are being degraded, not least by the way we produce food now, undermining our ability to feed ourselves in the future.

Recognising that urbanisation increasingly shapes the challenge to food security suggests that the challenge is not a single global issue, but is instead an outcome of the myriad food supply chains that take food from (mostly) rural areas

to (mostly) urban ones. The challenges that are often framed as global issues are also bound to specific places, both in causes and impacts, and in our ability to effect change.

## Linking cities and regions

Underlying the challenges of food security and a more sustainable, equitable food system is a profound disjunction between rural and urban development pathways, even though urban and rural areas remain linked by numerous ecological, social and economic processes. For example, rural areas provide food, water, energy, raw materials and labour to urban areas both local and further afield. Meanwhile, the concentration of people, capital and power in urban centres means that decisions and actions taken there affect rural people and places. Arguably, however, this interdependence has expressed itself in an ongoing reorganisation of rural spaces to serve the requirements of urban food consumption, at the expense of equitable and sustainable development – ultimately to the disbenefit of urban as much as rural communities.

At its root, the concept of city region food systems is about making the linkages between urban centres and their surrounding rural areas more effective at delivering sustainable socio-economic returns and a range of critical public goods. The rural-urban linkages that need attention span three dimensions: ecological, socio-economic, and governance linkages. In practice this might involve, for example, land-use planning that fosters more effective provision of ecosystem services, promoting shorter food supply chains, encouraging regional food enterprises, and creating participatory governance structures that include stakeholders

from multiple sectors and from both urban and rural areas. It is not a case of unquestioning localism. Rather, it is about creating a framework for conscious food governance that fosters improved balance between global and local food supply by taking local circumstances into account. It recognises the central role of the private sector in the food system, but is based on the understanding that public goods will not be delivered by market forces alone. Greater democratic participation in the food system and in decisions about food holds the possibility of profound socio-economic benefits across both urban and rural spaces.

### The benefits of city region food systems

Though the city region food system concept is already gaining traction as a framework for action, it is also a relatively young idea. Many and varied claims have been made for the beneficial impacts of adopting policies structured around city region food systems, including benefits to food security, economic development, environment, health and governance. A categorisation and evaluation of evidence for these benefits is needed in order to help focus attention on those that are most likely to be delivered with significant impact, and to help guide future policy and research. For example, each potential benefit can be evaluated by analysing the feasibility of the proposed mechanisms, the potential scale and scope of impact, and the strength of relevant empirical evidence.

A preliminary evaluation suggests that seeking to improve the effectiveness of city region food systems would indeed carry potential for broad and inclusive benefits, especially concerning regional economic development, health, and

better governance. We also find some evidence for benefits in other categories, including environment and food security, but note that substantial further research would be needed in order to base the policy and practice of city region food systems on categorical evidence.

### Making city region food systems a reality

Realising the potential benefits of city region food systems means changing the way that food systems operate as well as changing modes of thinking and action to create more harmonious links between rural and urban areas. The challenges of improving connectivity of this type should not be underestimated, but nonetheless there are promising examples of initiatives and programmes that have done just that. These include:

- putting in place more integrated and inclusive governance frameworks;
- planning for long-term value, including the provision of appropriate infrastructure and spatial planning;
- stimulating the demand for sustainable regional food through public procurement policy;
- leveraging enterprise, innovation and business as a way of delivering the benefits of city region food systems; and
- increasing the availability and transparency of information, including the use of information communications technology.

Reviewing a range of initiatives that already exist reveals that many have been driven or supported by public institutions (often working in alliance across jurisdictions). Depending on the initiative, civil society, entrepreneurs, farmers and businesses are also frequently involved. Scaling

*Tha Kee Lek City, Myanmar.* Photo by ArtThailand/shutterstock.com



up such approaches will require more multi-stakeholder alliances of this nature – participatory approaches are of key importance in reducing the risk of conflict around complex and sometimes politically sensitive local issues.

### Conclusions and recommendations

The range of negative impacts from current food systems is symptomatic of a wider imbalance between urban and rural development. Improving the effectiveness of city region food systems offers the potential to shift towards a more harmonious and equitable development trajectory, based on participatory governance that involves a range of city region stakeholders.

There is now an opportunity for change, with the confluence of an emerging body of thought and practice regarding city region food systems; the increasing commitment to end hunger; and the culmination of several international processes that will have a significant bearing on food systems and the future of urbanisation. Of most relevance in this regard are the finalisation of the Sustainable Development Goals, to be agreed at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015; a climate agreement to be delivered at COP 21 in Paris in December 2015; and, the Habitat III meeting, to take place in 2016. The next two years therefore offer a distinct window of opportunity to demonstrate the relevance and importance of city region food systems to a more balanced and integrated approach to rural and urban development.

Based on practical initiatives, ten actions are outlined that could help to strengthen city region food systems linkages in policy and practice:

#### Catalysing Change

1. Recognising the ability to act: City and rural authorities should explicitly recognise the links between food systems and a wide set of public goods (including access to healthy and nutritious food), and recognise the opportunity to facilitate positive change.
2. Convening stakeholders: Local authorities and civil society organisations can play a pivotal role in bringing together wide coalitions of interest, creating the basis for stakeholder engagement and support in future food policies and programmes.

#### Understanding the food system

3. Understanding local food systems: City region food policies need to be based on good understanding of the local context, including where food comes from ('foodprinting') and what the outcomes of the food system are for both urban and rural populations. Civil society, local authorities and the research community have a role in defining appropriate metrics, analysing data and making information publicly accessible.

#### Using policy instruments

4. City region policy: Policy and research communities, and development agencies, should actively support local authorities in the development of city region food policies, including land use and planning frameworks that enable multi-sector, territorial approaches.



Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo by Wyshe/istockphoto.com

5. Infrastructure and support: Local authorities and development agencies will need to invest in infrastructure such as market places and rural roads, conserve farm land under their purview, and invest in market information services that support city region value chains.
6. Procurement: City and rural authorities can catalyse city region food system value chains through public procurement policies: e.g. through incentives for meals for schools, prisons and hospitals to be sourced from local producers.
7. Enabling policy: National governments, international institutions and donor organisations should ensure their policies facilitate better city region food system governance; an early step would be to address existing policy barriers.

#### Leveraging wider impact

8. Enterprise and innovation: Local authorities and development agencies should create incentives for and support the development of new enterprises that link consumers and producers. Existing enterprises should invest in social and technical innovations to facilitate these connections.
9. Financing: Development agencies, governments and the investment and philanthropic communities should support initiatives that can strengthen city region food systems. Consideration should be given to financing mechanisms such as municipal bonds and social investment vehicles.

#### Learning and sharing knowledge

10. Spreading best practice: All actors should ensure that outcomes of initiatives to promote more sustainable city region food systems are recorded and evaluated. NGOs, national institutions and universities can play a role in facilitating the sharing of policy and practice between city regions nationally and internationally.

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#### Note

\* This article is a summary of a draft consultation document titled "Food in an Urbanised World: The role of city region food systems in resilience and sustainable development" elaborated by 3 Keel and commissioned by the Prince of Wales's International Sustainability Unit. The full report is available here: <http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/agphome/documents/horticulture/crfs/foodurbanized.pdf>