



# City Region Food Systems: An inclusive and integrated approach to improving food systems and urban-rural linkages

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*Food market.* Photo by Arnaud Thierry Gouegnon

**Urbanisation affects not only the structure of the agricultural sector and food systems, but also the larger non-farm economy. Recognising the diversity of urbanisation processes and rural linkage dependencies is essential, and a city region food systems approach can help better understand and link sustainable urbanisation and sustainable food systems across different contexts.**

## Recognising urban-rural dependencies

As populations gravitate around urban centres, whether megacities or small and medium-sized towns, there are now and will continue to be increased difficulties in meeting the needs and realising the rights of growing urban and rural-based populations. This includes the availability of adequate housing, transport, health and sanitation, education, ecosystem services and social protection. Another core challenge is to ensure adequate access in urban areas to food that is: healthy, meeting nutritional needs and free of harmful chemicals; accessible, in both price and availability; and sustainable, working with nature and through sustainable practices. Access to food is critical for those who buy more food from the market than they grow or sell (most of the poor in both urban and rural areas), and urban-rural linkages are a vital component to ensuring such access.

Opportunities are also created by urban development. Urban centres of different sizes have key roles in stimulating rural development through access to markets and services. However, the connectivity of urban centres to their rural hinterlands is often weak. Integrated territorial approaches can help development policies at the national and local levels to better take into account urban-rural interdependencies.

Regional and sub-regional differences shape the degree to which poor and marginalised rural people living around urban centres and in their hinterlands can take advantage of urban linkages and markets. A systems perspective is therefore vital to analysing and understanding the linkages from smallholder production, agricultural value chains and consumer demand – whether that be in urban or rural areas. In this context, a city region food system (CRFS) approach creates a critical lens for analysis, while at the same time supporting on-the-ground policy transformation and implementation. Urban and rural areas are often treated as separate sectors at a national and local level, and within different agencies on the international level. This distinction, however, does not reflect realities on the ground where flows between rural and urban areas are constant and are changing rapidly. Nor will this false dichotomy enable the needs of sustainable urbanisation and rural transformation to be met.

## Example: Quinoa in Bolivia linking farmers to urban markets

In Bolivia, the world's largest grower and exporter, quinoa (an Andean grain) has been seen as a "poor person's food" and most Bolivians have favoured less nutritious, imported grains. Now a campaign to promote quinoa consumption in Bolivia is improving not only diets, but also the livelihoods of small farmers. Through collaboration with restaurants in Bolivia, where a cake made of quinoa is sold in a popular coffee shop in La Paz, the income of smallholder farmers is improved and biodiversity conserved. (Source: IFAD. For further information, see video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4oZtVmWgOw&feature=youtu.be>)

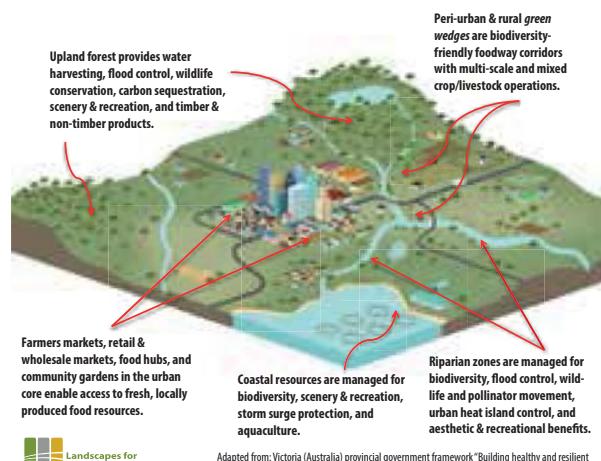
Fortunately, in debates concerning sustainable urbanisation in the context of a new post-2015 global development agenda, the rural-urban nexus has become a major theme. Additionally, there is now clear recognition of the need to target integrated urban, periurban and rural planning for sustainable development, including food and nutrition. This is reflected, for example, in the proposed Sustainable Development Goal 11, "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", slated for approval by UN members at the autumn 2015 General Assembly meetings. Section 11b refers explicitly to the need to support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, periurban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning<sup>1</sup>.

## Why city region food systems are important

Food systems are one way in which rural spaces and people are linked with urban areas and residents. Dynamic urban food systems and changing demand for food products – locally and internationally sourced, unprocessed and processed products – are driving transformations in food production and trade, with major implications for smallholders, rural and periurban producers, and key opportunities to improve the lives of marginalised populations.

City region food systems encompass the "complex network of actors, processes and relationships to do with food production, processing, marketing, and consumption that exist in a given geographical region that includes a more or less concentrated urban centre and its surrounding periurban and rural hinterland; a regional landscape across which flows of people, goods and ecosystem services are managed."<sup>2</sup>

In this concept of city region food systems, we include not only major cities and urban agglomerations, but also the small and medium-sized towns that provide critical links between people in rural areas and urban services, markets and employment opportunities.



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Source: <http://peoplefoodandnature.org/publication/city-regions-as-landscapes-for-people-food-and-nature/>

Improved city region food systems will help balance the urban with the rural to improve economic, social and environmental conditions. Access to affordable, nutritious, and fairly traded foods from local and regional producers will be more easily available to all communities, from rich to poor, and from rural to urban. Access to markets and support to alternative markets (e.g., community supported agriculture, farmers' markets, cooperatives, fair trade) will be available to smallholders and other small-scale producers, not just to big players. Shorter value chains, and more broadly efficient and functioning agricultural value chains that link hinterland producers to market systems, can contribute to sustainable diets and stabilise livelihoods in the distribution, processing and manufacture of food and fibre products.

Dynamic and accessible local and regional market systems are major drivers for social and economic development in both rural and urban areas. In the USA, where small- and medium-scale farmers have until recently been shut out of many wholesale markets, there is a movement to create a new generation of wholesale "regional food hubs" linking rural and periurban farmers to urban markets. For example, in the New York city region there is a coordinated planning effort to reinvest in food system infrastructure serving new institutional and wholesale demand for local foods, with new food hubs in both rural and urban areas.

In addition to benefits related to food, city regions can also benefit from improved ecosystem services provisioning clean water, nutrient and waste flows, and other natural resource, energy and labour flows. Scarce water, nutrients and energy, for example, can be resourced, reused and recovered from urban waste flows in a periurban setting.

When these services are well integrated by government, local private sector and civil society actions to serve economic, social and environmental values simultaneously, then a healthy symbiosis of towns and the rural areas around them may be concretely realised.

The city region food systems lens also offers an opportunity to implement equal access and rights-based approaches to development, as the current global food system does not adequately sustain or support the diverse range of all actors and their needs.

Urban food demand can stimulate the development of food systems and local economies that improve access to adequate food and nutrition for commonly marginalised populations. As well, urban food demand can stimulate the emergence of new markets related to evolving consumption patterns (e.g., fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and dairy). This is one way of moving towards realisation of the right to food for both urban and rural dwellers at the local level.

Developing well-functioning and efficient food chains between urban areas, whether small and medium-sized towns or cities, and between urban consumers and producers based either near them or in the urban hinterland, promises many benefits. These include increased availability of fresh locally produced fruit, vegetables and grains, and decreased food losses and waste, and also decreasing environmental impacts caused by long-haul transport.



Source: Urban Design Lab: [http://www.urbandesignlab.columbia.edu/?pid=nyc\\_foodshed](http://www.urbandesignlab.columbia.edu/?pid=nyc_foodshed)

Strengthening local food systems can also help mitigate the effects of price volatility and shocks in international markets while also providing more accessible markets for the agricultural products of regional food producers. There is some evidence from the early years of the food price crisis, 2007–2008, that regions with diverse local and regional food systems were better able to buffer the volatility of global food prices. Enabling policy environments for city region food systems (for example, through procurement, marketing and migration policies) can target better access to affordable, safe and locally produced food for low-income urban populations (not only middle- and upper-class residents) while further strengthening small-scale food producers.

These enabling environments may start with the development of food councils or strong executive (e.g., mayoral) leadership, or as a response to health or environmental pressures.

However, there are constraints that undermine the capacity to take full advantage of new opportunities in city region food systems. These include small-scale producers' poor and insecure access to, or control over, productive assets, financial services, knowledge and technology, and in some cases a lack of access to reliable energy, transport and infrastructure. Addressing such constraints partly depends on strengthening rural-urban connectivity via infrastructure, input and output markets, financial and technical advisory services, access to information and ICT. Access to these services, and in particular land, natural resources, seeds, and fair markets for small-scale producers can also be addressed by policy. Access is a critical component with regard to improving living and working conditions for these populations and at the same time streamlining and operationalising human rights obligations.

### Diversity of city region food systems and challenges

A city region food system approach recognises that there is great diversity regarding the context, nature of urbanisation (or in some cases a return to rural areas), size of urban centre, type of food systems, cultural values and traditions, and history of relations with the surrounding countryside and rural populations. For example, in those parts of Africa and Asia where urbanisation is expected to grow most rapidly, and where urban settlements will expand into areas that have previously been predominantly rural, competing with land used for agriculture, the challenges are dramatically different than those faced in cities of the global north and their need to retrofit human settlements to integrate urban and rural areas.

Detroit, Michigan in the United States may be among the most well known "retrofit" cities in the global north. Detroit is an industrial city in North America that suffered economic collapse and population loss but is rebuilding its urban infrastructure with a deliberate inclusion of urban and peri-urban food production. Land access and tenure, and access to neighbourhood, school food and other institutional food markets are among the challenges addressed with the help of a Detroit Food Policy Council founded in 2009 (<http://detroitfoodpolicycouncil.net>).

Barcelona, Spain is a striking example. This European city reinvested in a year-round market infrastructure that places markets within a short walk for all city residents while bringing the products of the Catalonia region to urban markets. This investment in markets is justified on the basis of not only economic value, but also social, cultural, resilience and health values.

Rosario, Argentina is one of the cities trying to better link peri-urban and rural production with urban consumers. It is preserving traditional agricultural production areas in the

areas surrounding the city and zoning them as protected land for primary production.

Whether expanding or retrofitting, addressing a city region food system necessarily includes the improvement of natural resource management and governance of farming systems so that they become more environmentally sustainable, resilient to climate change, and respectful of international rights obligations and frameworks. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to addressing challenges and opportunities related to city region food systems. Appropriate responses are likely to be more successful when better informed by evidence and knowledge gathered from different contexts and actors, and with full participation at the local level.

### **Meaningful multi-stakeholder approaches are essential**

The key actors involved in city region food systems are different in each context and often have competing interests. These interests need to be taken into account and addressed equitably in policy and decision processes in order to achieve city region food system development that can benefit all and support local economic and social development. This development includes involvement, from poor small-scale producers and family farmers, traders and processors on through to urban consumers requiring fresh, nutritious and affordable foods. Ideally, a city region food system agenda will also require collaboration between all levels of government (national, regional and local), nongovernmental and community-based organisations, farmers' organisations, the (local) private sector, the research and philanthropic communities and international support to scale up innovation.

However, local level food system development is usually achieved through individual, joint and collective initiatives, with small-scale food producers at the core, and in processes that are often delinked from the formal market and institutions. There is a need for greater understanding of how current local/regional food systems have formed and are functioning, and how policy at all levels can provide greater support to promote positive, local practices. These needs will become more apparent with direct involvement of local communities, with particular attention to small-scale producers and agricultural and food workers, in dialogue and policy decision-making. Best practices include multi-stakeholder food planning/policy councils, which many cities, including Toronto and Belo Horizonte, have successfully implemented.

### **Looking forward**

City region food system approaches can help inform the implementation of a linked transformative agenda for both sustainable food systems (stimulating smallholder agriculture, sustainable rural and urban production, employment, livelihood support, and food security) and sustainable urbanisation. Creating such linkages will be essential to a broad-based, equitable and sustainable development process.

In the next few years there will be opportunities to continue to elevate the compelling argument for territorially inclusive approaches to governance and food systems. These opportunities include, but are not limited to, the refinement of the post-2015 development agenda in 2016, and the Habitat III Conference to be held in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016. The post-2015 development agenda could include refined targets and indicators that focus attention on reducing rural-urban inequalities, balancing investments in rural and urban spaces and employment, promoting better connectivity and taking advantage of urbanisation to spur rural transformation. Stakeholder engagement with the above-mentioned and other policy processes can be undertaken in coordination with national delegations, UN agencies, civil society networks, the research community, donors and the private sector.

A *city region food system knowledge platform*, which is currently being developed in the context of a multi-stakeholder collaborative partnership (see [www.cityregionfood-systems.org](http://www.cityregionfood-systems.org)) will also be very useful for sharing information, knowledge, approaches and concrete, on-the-ground experience in emerging city region food systems around the world. It will provide a way to share evidence on the key trends and drivers of the linkages between rural and urban areas, people, their organisations and enterprises in relation to food systems, from production through to consumption, and on the diverse nature of city region food systems in distinct contexts.

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#### **Notes**

- 1 See: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1579SDGs%20Proposal.pdf>
- 2 Definition agreed during a meeting amongst CRFS partners in Rome, December 2013