

Nairobi's 21st Century Food Policy

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Kikuyu women conversing (Bazaar Street 1900). Photo History of Nairobi

Agroecology has been a characteristic of Nairobi urban farming historically, through the practices of small farmers. The new Nairobi City County government passed a progressive law on urban agriculture in 2015. It now promotes urban agriculture for food security, and will allocate land and water resources especially for vulnerable groups such as slum dwellers. Nairobi will be a good example to look at in coming years to observe how these innovative policies and administrative changes impact on people's lives. Incorporating agroecological processes is likely to be an institutional challenge as the new policy and governance arrangements are implemented.

Nairobi, Kenya's capital, is only 118 years old and was a racially-divided colonial city for much of its history. Urban agriculture practices in the city are well-documented, including nutrient re-use on small farms and nutrient flows across the city. After being ignored throughout the 20th century, urban agriculture and the management of the urban food system have seen substantial policy changes since Kenya's new constitution in 2010 entrenched the right to food. New laws nationally and locally aim at food and nutrition security, especially for low-income urban residents. Civil society and urban farmers may now be able to influence urban governance affecting food security. The article sets out the history and the positive policy achievements, as well as some of the hurdles to be

cleared in attaining an ecologically-balanced and equitable outcome for city residents in the 21st century.

Development of Nairobi's food system

When Nairobi was founded as a railway camp by British colonists in 1899, the local people were already feeding themselves – from agriculture in the hills above the city and pastoralism on the dry plains to the South East. There was trading along well-established routes. More agri-food businesses sprang up with the coming of the British settlers. Today's food system reflects history, despite political and social changes. Nairobi's early 20th century agri-food system was all about colonisation. There were biased rules and regulations and settlers dominated business and public life. Railway workers brought in from Asia were prevented from producing food and had to eat what was provided, many growing sick and even dying as a result, while baking and selling bread for example was reserved for a European-owned bakery. Generally, only African men, not women, were employed in town and they had to carry identity cards. Women were tolerated as they brought in food but were not accepted as urban residents. Up until independence in 1963, people of different races were restricted to specified areas and only Europeans owned urban land.

There were food businesses and urban demand stimulated vegetable farming in and around the city. Some vegetables came from small farms along the Nairobi River in the city centre, a site used for agriculture up until 2010, when a river clean-up got rid of urban agriculture. African women traders would also come into town by day to sell, hawking their vegetables door-to-door or by the roadside. This component of Nairobi's agri-food system has lasted until today, with itinerant women hawkers carrying heavy loads and still being harassed by the authorities.

Many things changed with independence in 1963, but many did not. Widespread throughout Nairobi's history, urban agriculture was not documented until 20% of Nairobi households were found growing crops in the city in the 1980s in a survey by Mazingira Institute. In 2017, this would represent well over 200,000 households. Likewise, 7% were keeping livestock. The 2009 census counted 55 thousand cattle in Nairobi, 47 thousand goats and 35 thousand sheep. Urban farms are more productive than rural farms, perhaps because of the availability of (mostly waste) water and other forms of organic waste which provide useful inputs to crop production and maintain backyard soil productivity. The 1980s survey found 35% of crop growers were using compost and 29% were using manure, 91 and 44% respectively producing these inputs on their own farms. This means agroecology was, and probably still is, prevalent on the city's small household farms.



Woman vegetable seller. Photo by Diana Lee-Smith

Nutrients and livestock in Nairobi's food system

The backyard ("next to the house") is the most common form of household urban agriculture found throughout Africa, although high densities in low-income areas make such gardening difficult. Most people with backyards are middle or high income. Studies by Urban Harvest, part of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), showed these farms are effective in cycling nutrients. Urban farmers in Nakuru, a town 150 km from Nairobi, recycled almost all their domestic organic waste, mostly as livestock fodder. Just under half the manure produced inside the town was re-used as fertiliser. But households with backyard crop-livestock farms re-used 88%, while poor farmers with less space only re-used 17%, resulting in dumping. Some intensive vegetable producers were, however, making good use of this manure on under-utilised land, and in 2009 the practice was expanded with municipal support, with plans to use dumped manure for co-composting, packaging and sale as bio-fertiliser.

Urban Harvest also found that 70% of Nairobi's solid waste is organic and biodegradable, typical of many African cities. Mapping its flows revealed that very little of this was used as fertiliser, and then in an uncoordinated way. Livestock manure was used to the extent that Maasai herders outside Nairobi were linked to urban and rural crop production through an organised market in the city, but this was disconnected from manure production within the city, where there was an almost total lack of market information on nutrients. Domestic solid waste was used as livestock feed in backyard farms. Although less than 1% of Nairobi's solid waste was processed, non-market systems worked better. An estimated 54,500 Nairobi farm households used compost they made themselves in the early 2000s, and 37,700 households used livestock manure to fertilise their crops, about half getting it from their own animals.

Because everyone thought urban dwellers were better off than rural people, it came as a shock in 2000 when the African Population and Health Research Council (APHRC) found that Nairobi slum residents had the worst health and nutritional status of any group in Kenya. This was attributed to the lack of basic services in these areas, which are overcrowded and lack water and sanitation.

Hunger is also widespread in these areas, many people only eating once a day or sometimes less. And Kenya is not alone in this. A survey in Southern Africa found 77% of low income urban dwellers were food insecure. While most urbanites who farm do so to feed their own families, they are not the poorest people. Urban farmers are better off than non-farmers. Slum dwellers cannot easily find space to farm whereas better-off urbanites have backyards where they can produce food. On the other hand, Urban Harvest showed that children who eat animal-source foods (milk, meat, eggs) are healthier, meaning urban livestock-keeping promotes child health. And, urban agriculture was linked statistically to better household food security. Thus, urban agriculture can alleviate malnutrition among urban dwellers if policies are targeted for slum dwellers, as Nairobi now plans to do.



Kibera slum in Nairobi. Photo by Diana Lee-Smith

21st Century policies

Kenya as a country is now implementing a Food and Nutrition Security Policy, with Food Security Committees at the level of counties – the new units of devolved government. The long-awaited Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture and Livestock Policy (UPAL) will be integrated into this institutional framework. A country-wide Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries Strategy (UPALF) is in fact already in place.

Because of devolution of political power to county governments, Nairobi has its own executive and has taken over several administrative functions, including agriculture. The City County of Nairobi's Assembly passed the Urban Agriculture Promotion and Regulation Act in 2015. The first objective of this Act is to "contribute to food security through the development of agriculture in the county by empowering people and institutions through allowing and facilitating agricultural activities for subsistence and commercial purposes". The fourth objective is to "Regulate access to land and water for use in urban agriculture within the county, giving priority to residents of high density and informal settlements", while the sixth objective is to "institutionalise administrative procedures for access to agricultural resources including organic waste". The city also has its own policy in place and in 2016 provided Inter-Sectoral Training on Urban Food Systems and Agriculture for its staff. In fact, this was seen as a pilot and Nairobi hopes to roll out more such training. The 2015 Act makes no explicit provision for stakeholder involvement, although there is a constitutional requirement for public consultation, and FAO is assisting Nairobi in developing a multi-stakeholder platform.

Civil society was in fact ahead of government in addressing Nairobi's food system. A bottom-up process called the Nairobi and Environs Food Security, Agriculture and Livestock

Forum (NEFSALF) was convened by the NGO, Mazingira Institute, in the early 2000s. Stakeholders came from the public sector, the private sector and the community sector (farmers). There was good attendance from the public sector in the form of extension representatives from the Ministries of Agriculture and Livestock, although the City Council seldom attended. The farmers began their own network in 2004, also called NEFSALF, which requested government to provide them with training. The response was positive and courses at Mazingira have continued until today. Nairobi's farmers frequently out-perform others in the country in national competitions.

What happens next?

The policy environment of urban agriculture has totally transformed in the 21st century, and the intentions of government are to support urban farmers, and promote urban agriculture by slum dwellers through making land and water available. There is a policy intention to improve the agroecology of the city by better nutrient cycling, through re-using organic wastes in urban and rural agriculture. This may be easier said than done, as agriculture and environment (responsible for waste in Nairobi) are separate sectors and so far, there has been no direct collaboration on this.

But neither have specific land and water arrangements yet been made to enable slum dwellers to farm. There are however active plans and efforts to institute this through project development by the city. In the longer term these will need to be monitored and evaluated in relation to levels of malnutrition and food security in Nairobi's slums. But key to the future governance of food security in the city will be the institutional relationship between Nairobi's farmers and the city government. NEFSALF has been a voice for the farmers prior to policy change, but will it, or other similar bodies of urban farmers continue to influence governance of urban agriculture? In the 20th century, urban farmers could not relate to the city government but only central government, through extension services they provided. Now those extension services are provided by Nairobi City County government. But will it be a top-down relationship, or will there be a political voice for the farmers and a say in governance?

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