



INTERNATIONAL FOOD
POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

sustainable options for ending hunger and poverty

LIVING IN THE CITY

Challenges and Options for the Urban Poor



URBAN FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The enormous demographic shift now taking place in developing countries will have major implications for efforts to reduce poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition. Over the next two decades 90 percent of population growth in developing countries will take place in the cities and towns. More than half of the population of Africa and Asia will live in urban areas by 2020. More than three-quarters of Latin Americans already do.

Data from many countries show that the concentration of poverty and malnutrition is shifting from rural to urban areas. Although many rural people move to the cities seeking to improve their well-being, they often remain mired in poverty and squalor. Rampant violence, flimsy housing, and filthy living conditions, along with hunger and malnutrition, are becoming the daily lot for more and more people as cities grow.

Relatively little is known about the determinants of urban food insecurity and malnutrition, but it is clear that the causes and the actors involved are more diverse and complex in urban settings than in rural ones. IFPRI and its collaborators are studying both the trends in urban food insecurity and malnutrition and the causes, which operate at individual, household, and community levels. They are also examining successful urban programs to learn more about how policies and programs can help overcome urban food insecurity and malnutrition.

LIVELIHOOD, FOOD, AND NUTRITION SECURITY OF THE URBAN POOR

Urban people's food and nutrition security is determined within the context of their livelihoods. Livelihoods encompass people's capabilities, assets, and activities for making a living, and these livelihoods are considered sustainable if they can recover from stress and shocks while not destroying the natural resource base. The goal of IFPRI's research is to provide policymakers with information that will help them create the conditions for sustainable livelihoods, including food and nutrition security, for all urban dwellers.

THE URBAN CASH ECONOMY

Involvement in the cash economy is an inescapable fact of life in urban environments. Whereas rural people can grow their own food, urban residents must buy most of what they eat. Food prices are thus especially important to urban food security, for an ample supply of food does not guarantee that the urban poor will be able to afford it. Several factors conspire to raise urban prices for food. Urban marketing systems in developing countries are often inefficient, with retail

markets frequently small and scattered. Poor people are often unable to lower their food costs by buying in bulk because they simply do not have enough cash to do so. In addition, many developing countries have eliminated food subsidies, increasing food prices for urban dwellers.

To pay for food, urban residents need secure sources of income, yet they often work for low wages in casual or temporary jobs. These jobs often experience seasonal ups and downs, just as in rural areas. Demand for construction workers, for instance, can decline dramatically during the rainy season. And the health of the overall economy can also affect the income and employment opportunities of urban workers. To increase incomes of the poor, national governments must establish macroeconomic policies that encourage growth and labor policies that do not discriminate against poor people.

When households cannot earn enough income to pay for their own food, safety nets can play an important role. Residents of urban areas may have slightly better access to formal assistance programs and social services, such as food-for-work programs, credit programs, health care, and education than residents of rural areas. It is not clear, however, whether the urban poor in many cities have strong access to the kinds of social networks that they can rely on for help with food and housing in times of trouble. These informal safety nets depend on networks of trust relationships, which may be fewer in urban areas.

“I HAVE A SMALL SHOP. I WORK VERY HARD. MY HUSBAND HAS PASSED AWAY. AND I AM TRYING. MY PROBLEMS ARE STILL THERE. WE SIMPLY LIVE. THAT’S ALL.”

(Resident, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia)



THE LINK BETWEEN CITY AND COUNTRYSIDE

Policymakers must also examine how goods, services, and people link urban and rural areas. In secondary cities many people depend directly on farming within or outside city limits. In Mozambique over half of employment in towns and cities outside Maputo, the capital, is in agriculture. About 70 percent of these workers, often unpaid family labor, are women. Many more people, including men, are involved indirectly in agriculture as vendors of agricultural supplies and as processors, transporters, wholesalers, and retailers. In addition, many city dwellers still own land in the country and may fall back on relatives in rural areas in time of need. Policies must take into account that the livelihoods of the urban poor do not exist in geographical isolation; instead, their lives, needs, and survival strategies span the urban-rural divide.

“I ESCAPED AND WENT TO WORK IN THE COMMUNITY KITCHEN OVER THE OBJECTIONS OF MY HUSBAND. NOW I SAY WHAT GOES ON AT HOME. WE HAVE A BUSINESS, A LITTLE RESTAURANT. I FEEL I AM A WOMAN, THAT I AM FULLY CAPABLE.”

(Community kitchen participant, on the increase in her self-esteem and on her business resulting from the project, Lima, Perú)

WOMEN'S WORK

Women in urban areas are more likely than those in rural areas to work outside the home in order to contribute to the household's livelihood. This situation may either improve or reduce the food and nutrition security of the household, particularly for children. Research shows that urban mothers tend to adjust their work patterns to meet the changing needs of their children. For example, women may take themselves out of the work force while their children are very young and may later take their children to work with them. But the effect of women's work on children's nutritional status also depends on the children's age, the women's working conditions, and the availability of alternative child care arrangements.

“WHEN I HAVE TO LEAVE MY CHILD [TO GO BACK TO WORK] MY STOMACH BURNS ME, BUT I HAVE TO WORK TO EARN MONEY. CARING FOR YOUR CHILD IS IMPORTANT, BUT YOU ALSO HAVE TO EARN MONEY TO PROVIDE FOR YOUR CHILD.”

(Gha woman in Accra)

On the one hand, the additional income working women earn may give them greater control over the household's resources and may lead to greater expenditures on food and children's needs. On the other hand, women who work outside the home may not be able to spend as much time managing the household, buying and preparing food, or taking care of children. Urban women end breastfeeding two to three months earlier than rural women, perhaps depriving their children of needed nutrients and reducing immunity. Improving women's educational levels and providing mothers with information they need on child care are important components of a strategy to improve nutrition.

URBAN AGRICULTURE

Although agriculture is usually perceived as only a rural activity, it can also be an element in urban livelihoods, serving as a source of food and employment for poor households and for entire cities. Even in crowded areas, people can often find space to grow vegetables or raise animals to supplement the food they buy. Many of these urban farmers are women.

The extent of urban agriculture varies widely depending on land availability and legal restrictions. Studies show that as much as 40 percent of the population in African cities and up to 50 percent in Latin American cities are involved in urban or periurban agriculture. In the 1980s urban and periurban agriculture in China's largest cities met more than 90 percent of vegetable demand and more than half of meat and poultry demand. Yet periurban farmers often face pressure to abandon farming as cities expand their borders.

City governments must pay attention to the potential of urban agriculture for improving households' food and livelihood security. Although a household's own urban agriculture is rarely its main source of food, growing vegetables or raising small animals in urban areas can significantly raise a poor household's income and improve the nutrition of household members.



URBAN

DIETS AND FOOD SECURITY

Urbanization often brings with it changes in diets that may pose new risks to people's health and nutrition status. Urban dwellers often have less time available for buying and preparing food, greater exposure to advertising, and easier access to supermarkets and street foods. As a result they often eat more processed and prepared foods. One study found that city residents in Nigeria spent up to 50 percent of their total food expenditures on street foods. Whereas urban residents typically consume more micronutrients and animal proteins than rural residents, they also consume more saturated and total fat and sugar and less fiber. Combined with a sedentary lifestyle, this diet increases the risk of chronic diseases, including obesity. Diseases of excess thus coexist in the same society, and sometimes in the same household, as hunger and malnutrition.

THE URBAN

ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD SECURITY

Good health is essential to food and nutrition security. Although urban dwellers generally have greater access to health facilities, schools, safe water, sanitation, and garbage disposal than do rural dwellers, infrastructure often cannot keep up with population growth. In such cases it is usually the poor who do without these public services. One study shows that less than 20 percent of the urban poor worldwide have access to safe water, compared with 80 percent of the rich.

Surrounded by uncollected garbage, unsafe water, and overflowing sewers, the urban poor must work hard to prevent contamination of their food and water, to maintain household hygiene, and to control disease carriers like rats and mosquitoes. These conditions contribute to disease and death in children and cause illness among adults.

Although cities often have more health facilities than rural areas, poor people often fail to use them because of high user fees, high transportation costs, constraints on their time, or poor quality of service.

RESEARCH

AND POLICY FOR URBAN FOOD SECURITY

Urban hunger and malnutrition are problems that are all too often overlooked, for a number of reasons. In some cases, other needs are more visible. For example, cleaning up slums mired in dirty water and human filth seems more urgent than attacking the problems of food insecurity and malnutrition; squalid conditions are much more easily seen than hunger. Frequently, the poor themselves do not see food security or nutrition as high priorities; hunger and malnutrition seem normal since they have been part of their lives for so long.

Food and nutrition insecurity in urban areas takes place in an environment of diverse conditions, problems, and actors. To meet the rising challenge of urban food insecurity and malnutrition, governments, communities, and aid agencies must work together. But improved responses to these problems require more information about their causes and better analyses of what programs and policies are most effective. IFPRI's research, spanning three continents, provides policymakers, program administrators, and development practitioners with information to help them take sound steps to address this challenge. Its work is designed to help these decisionmakers better understand the processes that lead to urban poverty and food insecurity and to pass along information about what works in overcoming these growing problems.

Governments and donor agencies tend to view hunger and malnutrition as general indicators of the success of other development activities, rather than as the central focus of their antipoverty strategies. Improving urban food and nutrition security requires a more direct, more focused, and more integrated approach. Policymakers cannot afford to miss the opportunity to use and build on currently available knowledge and resources to dramatically reduce hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. Urban populations will continue to grow, and these problems will only grow with them—unless we take action now.

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