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Comparative urban food geographies in Blantyre and Gaborone

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Abstract

The geographical diversity of African cities creates context-specific strengths and weaknesses in household food security that come to light in the comparative case study presented in this paper. A recent survey of low-income households in eleven southern African cities found a much higher rate of food security in Blantyre (48%) relative to Gaborone (18%), a surprising finding considering Blantyre's lower "development" status in terms of urban infrastructure, economic opportunities, and urban planning. A comparison of the relative scales at which the food production and distribution networks operate to feed each of the cities offers some insight into why Gaborone's "development" is paradoxically linked to the higher level in food insecurity among its low-income households. The majority of households in the Blantyre survey produced some of their own food and usually purchased food from informal markets; by contrast most of the food in Gaborone is produced outside of the country and accessed through international supermarket chains. The comparison of these cities, typical of the urban extremes in southern Africa, throws into bold relief the important role of scalar analysis for theorizing urban food security in the Global South.

Keywords: urban food security; Malawi; Botswana; comparative urban geographies

1. Introduction

A renewed interest in urban food security research in sub-Saharan Africa has been spurred by high rates of urbanization, a persistent rural bias in food security policy and research, and a resurgence in interest in urban issues from post-colonial, post-development, and post-structural reform perspectives (Porter *et al.*, 2007, Cohen & Garrett, 2010, Frayne *et al.*, 2010, Crush & Frayne 2011a, Battersby, 2012). One of the foremost empirical contributions to this literature was a baseline survey of 6,451 households in low-income neighbourhoods in 11 southern African cities (Crush & Frayne, 2010a). Coordinated through the African Food Security-Urban Network, the baseline survey found that more than three quarters (77%) of households were food insecure (Frayne *et al.*, 2010). The survey found a high degree of diversity in terms of how people accessed food in African cities, which was linked to the built and natural environments, political and social structures, and the linkages of each city to the global food economy (Crush & Frayne, 2011b, Crush, Hovorka & Tevera, 2011). One of the surprising findings was that urban food security was not strongly correlated to the developmental status of the urban areas studied. More formalised food systems in which people obtained most of their food from supermarkets and formal shops were not correlated with higher rates of food security among low-income households. This paper draws on the survey findings from Blantyre, Malawi and Gaborone, Botswana, supplemented with qualitative data gathered in parallel urban case studies, to argue that conventional models of urban development can produce forms of vulnerability for low-income residents that are less apparent in a relatively informalized urban food system.

A key challenge for understanding urban food security as a global development problem is how to account for the unique set of opportunities and constraints that exist in different urban contexts for low-income households to access food. Myers (2011: 2-

3) argues that any attempt to "model" African urbanism is bound to be "absurd and reductionist," yet at the same time there is a need for empirical research that goes deeper than a generalizing narrative (usually reduced to a crisis narrative) about African cities while avoiding the pitfalls of abstracting individual case studies from the broader reality of Africa's developmental challenges. We argue that our empirically informed comparison of two very different southern African cities provides a space to negotiate these extremes and draw conclusions of wider relevance without overshadowing the importance of context. As a pair of African cities, Blantyre and Gaborone could hardly be more distinct from one another: Blantyre is situated in the verdant Shire Highlands, whereas Gaborone is on a dry plain; Blantyre was a colonial European settlement in the nineteenth century, whereas Gaborone was established by the newly independent Government of Botswana in 1963; most residents of Blantyre live in unplanned settlements, whereas Gaborone is fully serviced with road, water, and sewage infrastructures. The opportunity to compare these vastly different cities using a single baseline survey and simultaneously conducted in-depth qualitative studies provides a rare and useful opportunity to bring depth to academic and policy debates on food security African cities.

Given the assumed link between prosperity and food security, the most likely outcome of the baseline survey would have been high rates of food security in Gaborone relative to Blantyre. Yet, for highly contextual reasons, the survey found low-income household in Blantyre to be more food secure than those in Gaborone. We argue that a constructive avenue for understanding this apparent anomaly lies in the critical analysis of the relative scales of the food systems in each city. Low-income households in Gaborone rely mostly on imported food purchased from transnational grocery store chains. There are few alternatives to this formalized, internationally integrated system,

which shapes the types of food people eat, where they access food, and the price of food. Blantyre also has Shoprite outlets and other formal sector food suppliers, but the vast majority of low-income households access food through informal markets and through their own agricultural activities. Although they have lower incomes, they have greater diversity of food sources and a broader set of entitlements, which provides higher levels of food security at lower levels of cash income. The following section provides more details about theoretical approaches to comparative urban research. The subsequent sections describe the methods used to gather the data, the levels of food security in Blantyre and Gaborone, observations about where people are buying food in each city and the extent to which people are producing their own food in each city. We then turn to the concept of scale to argue that low-income households in Blantyre and Gaborone are vulnerable to events at different scales, such that one is not necessarily superior, but that each city's food system creates different geographies of vulnerability for its low-income residents.

2. Comparative urbanism, development, and food security in southern African cities

Our comparison of Blantyre and Gaborone is partly inspired by calls for more comparative urban geographies on case studies beyond the traditional centres of the Global North (Robinson, 2006, Myers, 2011, Parnell & Robinson, 2012). Blantyre and Gaborone are both "ordinary cities" (Robinson, 2006), of marginal importance even within the context of African urban studies, and yet this very ordinariness makes them a compelling case for comparison. Although this body of work is primarily concerned with addressing the Global North/Global South duality in formal urban studies, the comparison of Blantyre and Gaborone illustrates that characteristically "modern" and "underdeveloped" urban spaces co-exist in Africa. As cases for comparison, they fit

neatly into a revision of the two "theoretical manoeuvres" that Robinson (2011: 3) argues have stymied comparisons of wealthier and poorer cities. The first manoeuvre "proposed the close association between (certain) cities and the experience of modernity" (Robinson, 2011: 3), with the effect of relegating urban spaces with (subjectively defined) traditional, rural, and primitive characteristics as definitively not urban. The second manoeuvre was the introduction of developmentalism, with which "markers of the not-modern came to characterize an urban space in need of development" (Robinson, 2011: 3). Thus a narrowly defined geographical form of urbanism came to be emblematic of not only a city's, but also a whole nation's developmental status.

Robinson (2011: 3) lists specific characteristics that mark problematically undeveloped urban spaces: "limited urban infrastructure, informal construction methods, lack of planning, lack of economic opportunity, informal economic activities, large population growth with limited economic growth, external dependency." These are mostly relative characteristics, and they are therefore heuristically amenable to the comparison of two cities in relation to one another. Relative to Gaborone, Blantyre has poor urban infrastructure, more informally constructed buildings, less planned space, and more informal economic activities than Gaborone. As we demonstrate below, the point on external dependency is the one aspect in which Gaborone is clearly less "developed." The planning, building, and infrastructures that make Gaborone more "developed" are largely possible because of Botswana's mineral exports, making it dependent on foreign markets and foreign investment. More crucially for our analysis of food security is the fact that Gaborone depends on imported food for its viability in a harsh climate. The scale at which its food network operates, both in terms of its thoroughly transnational character and the physical distances food travels to be

consumed there creates a form of vulnerability at the household level that differs from the types of food insecurity that exist in Blantyre.

Our observations about the implications for the *urban* in urban food security rest on a particularly geographical conceptualization of food security, encapsulated by the concept of vulnerability. Watts and Bohles (1993: 44) developed the concept of "spaces of vulnerability," which foregrounds "the locally and historically specific configuration of poverty, hunger and famine." We use this highly geographical interpretation of vulnerability to capture the factors operating at multiple scales to shape vulnerability at the household scale, for certain households in each city. The very category of "the city" implies a scale, in some respects this conforms to the political boundaries of the cities proper, but the study of urban food cannot be confined to these boundaries because the food very rarely originates within this delimited zone. Rather, food immediately and inevitably implies reference to political, economic, and ecological factors beyond the city. Just as the dual-city comparison was helpful in identifying the relative markers of development of each city, the scales of food are also relevant to understanding the link between power, space and vulnerability. As Glick-Schiller (2012: 885, emphasis added) noted in terms of comparative urban studies of migration: "scalar concepts indeed are helpful but only if they are understood as *relative* conceptualizations of both space and networks." The agents and power relations that come into view at these scales of analysis highlight the relative differences in the forces that are shaping food insecurity in Blantyre and Gaborone. They are forging spaces of vulnerability in Gaborone that are resistant to the city's economic prosperity. Meanwhile, the configurations of vulnerability in Blantyre appear to be more resilient, even as this is counter-intuitive to the progressivist assumption underlying development thought.

3. Methodology

The comparative data in this paper is drawn from three sources: the AFSUN survey, a qualitative case study conducted in Gaborone on urban food consumption, and a qualitative case study conducted in Blantyre on gender and urban food security. The AFSUN survey gathered information related to the livelihoods and food security status of 28,772 individuals in 6,452 households in 11 cities in 2009 (Frayne *et al.*, 2010). The survey employed four measures of household food security status: Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP), Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS), and Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning Indicator (MAHFP).ⁱ The survey in Gaborone took place in October 2008 and 400 households comprising 1,237 individuals participated. These households were randomly selected from three low-income neighborhoods: Old Naledi (150 households), Broadhurst (125 households), and White City/Bontleng (125 households) (Acquah, 2009). The survey in Blantyre was conducted in late 2008 and 432 households including 2,730 individuals were surveyed within the low-income peri-urban neighbourhood of South Lunzu (Mvula & Chiweza, 2009).

The qualitative case studies were designed independently of each other and the AFSUN survey with the goal of contributing empirically grounded qualitative insights to the academic and policy debates about urban food insecurity in southern Africa. The qualitative fieldwork in Blantyre, conducted in 2010, consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews (N=40), observation in markets, participative diagramming (N=43 in eight groups), unstructured key informant interviews (individuals N=7, groups N=46), and newspaper analysis. The qualitative fieldwork in Gaborone consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews (N=40), observation of households, shopping malls and grocery stores. Each of the 40 households participating in interviews also kept

seven-day food consumption diaries in which they noted the foods consumed during every meal. The inspiration for this comparative study came from our visits to each other's field sites during the course of our fieldwork, such that we were both able to observe first hand the different socio-spatial context of food security in each city. Throughout the analysis of our respective qualitative data sets, we drew insights through casual comparisons of what we found. The insights generated through these informal conversations are the backdrop of the analysis that follows.

4. Levels of household food security in Blantyre and Gaborone

The AFSUN survey found Blantyre and Gaborone were at opposing ends of a wide spectrum of household food security outcomes among the different cities. Table 1 compares the HFIAS and HFIAP scores in Blantyre and Gaborone against the total population in the survey (including Blantyre, Gaborone, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Msunduzi, Manzini, Maseru, Maputo, Harare, Lusaka, and Windhoek). The mean (5.3) and median (4.0) HFIAS scores for Blantyre were much lower than for Gaborone (10.8 and 11.0 respectively) and for the entire survey (10.3 and 10.0 respectively). The difference between Blantyre's scores and those of the entire sample of households shows that households in Blantyre were far more food secure than households elsewhere. In terms of HFIAP, Blantyre's proportion of fully food secure households (34%) was double the amount for the entire survey (17%), and even higher relative to Gaborone (12%). At the other extreme, households in Gaborone were three times as likely (63%) as households in Blantyre (21%) to be severely food insecure. It is important to highlight the fact that the spatial sampling within each city was designed to target low-income areas rather than achieve representativeness for each city as a whole (Crush & Frayne, 2011). The complementary qualitative research found pockets of intense food insecurity in low-income neighbourhoods in Blantyre whose circumstances

were not captured by the survey.

Table 1: Food insecurity in Blantyre and Gaborone (source: Frayne *et al.*, 2010)

	Blantyre (N=429)	Gaborone (N=391)	Total (N=6,306)
Mean HFIAS	5.3	10.8	10.3
Median HFIAS	4.0	11.0	10.0
Food secure (%)	34	12	17
Mildly food insecure (%)	14	6	7
Moderately food insecure (%)	30	19	19
Severely food insecure (%)	21	63	57

The surprisingly high rate of household food security in Blantyre relative to Gaborone was not merely the result of anomalies in spatial sampling frame for each city. Afrobarometer conducts standardised surveys across the continent and, as Table 2 shows in terms of urban Malawi and urban Botswana (not specifically Blantyre and Gaborone), there is a similar trend whereby urban households in Malawi are less likely to go without food on a frequent basis than urban households in Botswana. Furthermore, and in keeping with our thesis that urban food access is not only a question of economic entitlements, Malawi's urban households were far more likely than their counterparts in Botswana to go without cash income (Table 2). The Afrobarometer data shows that many households in Malawian cities are able to access food even when they do not have a regular source of cash income.

Table 2: Going without food and going without cash income in Blantyre and Gaborone (source: Afrobarometer, 2013)

	How often gone without food?		How often gone without a cash income?	
	Urban Malawi (N=459)	Urban Botswana (N= 767)	Urban Malawi	Urban Botswana
Never	67	57	20	30
Just once or twice	6	17	8	15
Several times	18	15	35	21
Many times	8	9	34	21
Always	1	2	3	12
Don't know	0	0	-	0

5. Spaces of food sourcing in Blantyre and Gaborone

A detailed examination of where people were accessing food in Blantyre and Gaborone reveals two very different geographies of urban food access. Table 3 shows that when asked, "Where do you normally obtain your food (multiple responses permitted)?" almost all households in Gaborone (97%) and slightly more than half (53%) in Blantyre listed supermarkets. By contrast, almost all of the households in Blantyre (99%) and less than a third in Gaborone (29%) said they normally obtained food from an informal market (Table 3). The extreme difference between Gaborone and Blantyre is made ever clearer by the frequency with which households are using each food source (Table 4). Nearly half (48%) of households in Blantyre said they "never" shop at supermarkets. The next most popular response was to shop at supermarkets only once per month (29%). Most households in Gaborone reported that they patronize a supermarket on a monthly basis (65%), with only ten per cent shopping at supermarkets on a "frequent" basis. By contrast, a vast majority (80%) of households in Blantyre visit informal markets on a frequent basis (about five times per week), which shows that food sourcing is more integrated into daily life in Blantyre than in Gaborone.

Table 3: Sources normally used to obtain food in Blantyre and Gaborone (source: Crush & Frayne, 2011b)

	Gaborone	Blantyre	Total AFSUN Survey
Informal market	29	99	70
Supermarket	97	53	79

In the qualitative study of Blantyre, observation and participative mapping of where people were accessing food revealed that a variety of types of places were contained in the term "informal markets." Some informal markets were built and administered by the City Assembly and operated by independent vendors who would pay a daily operating fee. The most popular of these markets was the newly constructed Limbe Market, where people could access high quality food at low prices because of the high volume of sales. At the other extreme were smaller informally regulated markets

where vendors either operated out of small shacks or at the roadside, usually in informal settlements. These markets often provided a low-cost source of food that was physically more accessible because of its proximity to the consumers' houses. Another important finding from the participative mapping sessions was that many people named rural informal markets near the city as important food sources. The cost savings for food purchased at these markets was low enough to offset the cost of time and bus fare to travel up to 20 kilometers to purchase food. The relative affordability of food at rural informal markets is particularly salient to the AFSUN findings because the survey was conducted in South Lunzu Ward, which is near Lunzu Market. Lunzu Market is a bustling peri-urban market, which was established along a major trade route in the nineteenth century (Chihana, 1994). The category of "informal markets" in Blantyre therefore refers to a diverse set of places, in urban and peri-urban areas, many of which have co-evolved with the city itself to meet the needs of the low-income urban majority.

Table 4: Proportion of households in Gaborone, Blantyre, and 11 AFSUN cities obtaining food from informal markets and supermarkets in the previous week and the frequency with which households normally obtain food at informal markets and supermarkets in Gaborone, Blantyre, and 11 AFSUN cities (source: Crush & Frayne, 2011a)

	Informal markets (% patronizing)			Supermarkets (% patronizing)		
	GB	BT	Total	GB	BT	Total
In previous week	23	97	60	79	28	54
Frequently (5 X/week)	12	80	32	10	5	5
1/week	11	15	27	19	16	19
1X/month	3	1	7	65	24	51
1X/6 months	1	0	1	1	5	2
Occasionally	0	0	0.5	0	1	1
Never	71	4	31	4	48	22

As a city that was planned to be a modern settlement, Gaborone lacks the deep roots of Blantyre's informal sector. The land now occupied by the city of Gaborone was uninhabited when the city was established in 1963 as a capital to replace Mafikeng, South Africa, where Bechuanaland had been administered at arm's length (Mosha, 1996,

Grant, 2006). Low agricultural productivity and Botswana's long-standing political and cultural ties to South Africa have meant that the importation of food from South Africa has been a normal practice in Gaborone since its inception. Furthermore, traditional authorities in the area around Gaborone banned the sale of agricultural surpluses, sequestering the produce for communal consumption in years of agricultural deficit (Denbow & Thebe, 2006). These historical, geographical, and political factors stymied the evolution of the kind of dynamic informal sector in Blantyre. The informal food sector that exists today is in form of vending stands located at transportation hubs that operate out of trucks or at small tables (Lane *et al.*, 2012).

The category of supermarkets, which dominated consumption patterns in Gaborone but was irrelevant to almost half of the households in Blantyre, also represents a varied set of food sources. Blantyre has several types of large-scale formal shops that could have been included in this category during the survey, including the former parastatal grocery chain (People's) and several shops owned by Asian-Malawian families. In terms of the typical Western-style supermarket, with bright fluorescent lights, air conditioning, wide aisles, a bakery, butchery, and a range of imported foods, there is only the Shoprite at Chichiri Mall. Gaborone, in contrast, has many supermarkets conforming to this Western-style standard that cater to upper, middle, and low-income consumers. The city was laid out according to a modernist model of urban planning, which included large-scale commercial centers within each residential area most easily accessed with a car or by public transit (Mosha, 1996). South African chain supermarkets such as Shoprite, Pick'n'Pay, and Woolworth's are as characteristic of Gaborone's urban landscape as informal markets are in Blantyre. It is relatively easy for South African chains to operate in Gaborone, which is only 300 kilometers from Johannesburg. The process of supermarketization in Gaborone is nearly complete,

whereas in Blantyre there is little evidence that it is making inroads except among a small elite group of residents.

6. Spaces of food production in Blantyre and Gaborone

In addition to where people were buying food, the issue of how many households were producing food for home consumption showed a sharp contrast between Blantyre and Gaborone. Households in Blantyre were far more likely to produce some of their own food, which was an important factor in broadening their food entitlements and making them relatively more food secure (Crush, Hovorka & Tevera, 2011). In response to the question of where households normally obtain their food, 64% of households in Blantyre and only 5% of households in Gaborone said they grew it (Table 5). Table 5 shows that when asked about the importance of agriculture as one of many livelihood strategies, Blantyre and Gaborone differed profoundly in terms of the reliance on field crops and livestock. In terms of dependence on field crops, Blantyre (61%) was well above both the regional average (11%) and the proportion of households in Gaborone (22%) (Table 5). Gaborone (14%) had the highest proportion of households dependent on livestock of any city in the sample and was much higher than the proportion in Blantyre (both 4%). As our comparison of Blantyre and Gaborone suggests, despite the finding that "urban agriculture is not as widely practiced or as important to the food security of the urban poor in Southern Africa as is sometimes claimed" (Crush, Hovorka & Tevera, 2011: 298), in some cities, including Blantyre, it appears to be crucially important for household food security in low-income households.

Table 5: Urban agriculture in Blantyre and Gaborone (source: Crush, Hovorka & Tevera, 2011)

	Blantyre	Gaborone	Total
Normally grow own food	64%	5%	22%
Partially or totally dependent on field crops as an additional livelihood strategy	61%	22%	11%
Partially or totally dependent on livestock as an additional livelihood strategy	4%	14%	4%
Partially or totally dependent on garden crops as an additional livelihood strategy	9	7	10
Partially or totally dependent on tree crops as an additional livelihood strategy	2	5	2

A generation of urban planners have recognised the potential for urban agriculture to meet the needs of the urban poor in Gaborone, but there has been a persistent disconnect between policy action and popular interest in farming. Land is only developed in Gaborone after being serviced with water and electricity, and in practice there has been widespread adherence to urban development plans developed by Botswana's Department of Local Government and the Department of Town and Regional Planning (Nkambwe & Totolo, 2005). The land-use planning in place has accommodated the establishment of middle-class entrepreneurial urban agriculture, while subsistence agriculture among low-income households within the city has failed to gain traction as an urban poverty or food security strategy (Hovorka, 2004). Chicken production has been the most successful form of urban agriculture in Gaborone because the national Government targeted financial assistance to poultry producers and restricted poultry imports in an effort to diversify domestic food production (Hovorka, 2004, Moreki, 2011). This top-down approach has created a highly capitalized and commercialized urban agriculture sector in Gaborone that is vastly different from the largely subsistence urban agricultural activities in Blantyre. Environmental constraints (particularly the scarcity of water) and cultural attitudes that eschew agriculture in favour of more "urban" economic activities such as trading and waged employment, constrain the popularity of urban agriculture in Gaborone.

The apparent success of urban agriculture in Blantyre is probably over-stated by the AFSUN findings because of the part of the city where the survey was conducted. South Lunzu Ward is located at the north-east edge of the city, on the far side of Mount Ndirande, and maintains a largely peri-urban character. It was the last area annexed by the City of Blantyre (in 1988), and although it received substantial public investments in housing upgrades, there is on-going tension between indigenous groups and settlers (Binauli & Kunkwenzu, 2001). Like other parts of Blantyre, South Lunzu was administered under the Traditional Housing Area scheme, meaning that traditional authorities were kept in place to provide local governance under the guidance of the parastatal Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC). Recent changes to the institutions of local government have officially nullified the legal jurisdiction of "town chiefs" (Cammack *et al.*, 2009), and yet they continue to exert *de facto* control over their territories because of the lack of governing capacity among formal local governing bodies (Chome & McCall, 2005, Tambulasi, 2010). The qualitative study in Blantyre found that some households in peripheral communities within the City of Blantyre continued to have customary entitlements to the use of farmland in town, which was granted by the local traditional authority. The Group Village Headwoman in Misesa Ward (at the southern edge of the city) said in an interview that she allocated land to established residents in her village. Her household farmed several hectares that provided them with an oversupply of maize (the staple food) for the year. Although data about land tenure was not captured in the AFSUN survey, it is likely that many households in South Lunzu Ward had customary access to urban farmland, and consequently that the rate of households producing field crops exaggerated the rate for the city overall. Nonetheless, the co-incidence of high levels of household food security and high levels of field crop production in Blantyre relative to Gaborone highlights the value of land

entitlements to low-income urban households who might otherwise find it difficult to meet their food needs through cash incomes and purchased food.

7. Comparative scales and comparative vulnerabilities

As distinct urban environments, Blantyre and Gaborone contain different constraints and opportunities for low-income households to meet their food needs. The different dimensions of vulnerability in each context can be broadly distinguished based on their geographical features, including the distances from whence the food travels to each place, the physical characteristics of the markets, the environmental suitability for local food production, and the way land use is governed in each city. The comparison of these two vastly different cities draws attention to the geographical scales of their respective food networks. The vulnerability among households in Gaborone is largely shaped by events in locations farther away from the city where the food is produced and marketed. Price shocks on globally traded food commodities, for example those which caused upheaval across the Global South in 2008 (Clapp & Cohen, 2009), have a much more direct impact on low-income residents of Gaborone than on those in Blantyre. Low-income households in Blantyre, on the other hand, are more vulnerable to local events such as seasonal price fluctuations with the agricultural cycle, changes in local weather patterns (including changes related to climate change), and the loss of household agricultural labour. Whereas the AFSUN survey found low-income households in Blantyre to be far more food secure than low-income households in Gaborone, 2009 was an exceptionally good year for local maize production (Reliefweb, 2009). Events such as the 2001/02 famine exposed the real vulnerabilities exist in Malawi related to food supply that do not exist in Gaborone. Even if the AFSUN survey overstated the difference in food security levels in Blantyre relative to Gaborone, the overall picture is one in which the more "developed" city is not *necessarily* a place where low-income

urban households are less vulnerable. In this section we turn our attention to the relative scales of the economic, environmental, and political institutional networks that feed the two cities to outline some of the causes for food insecurity in spite of the existence of a relatively "developed" urban form.

The distances from "farm to fork" have received much academic and policy attention in the Global North in relation to concerns about environmental sustainability of agriculture, the exploitation of farmers in the Global South, and the loss of cultural and health benefits to Northern countries highly dependant on imported food (Benson & Fischer, 2007, Jackson, Ward & Russell, 2009, Koc, Sumner & Wilson, 2012).

Gaborone's exposure to world food markets is evident in the statistics on Botswana's food trade balance. Low unpredictable rainfall patterns that plague arable farming have led to a consensus that reliance on imported food "is not a failure on the part of the government, but a rational, logical and pragmatic decision that promotes the long-term interest of the country" (Lado, 2001: 161). While the country is self-sufficient in beef production, more than two-thirds of the annual grain requirement is imported (Seleka, 2005). Foreign exchange earned through mining exports facilitates food imports from neighbouring South Africa, where industrial-scale food production and processing provides the quality and quantity demanded by the modern retail sector which handles most of food sourcing in Botswana (Emongor & Kirsten, 2009).

Blantyre is situated in a vastly different natural environment, which is far more conducive to agricultural production. One of the main reasons for the establishment of the city was to service the plantation economy of the Shire Highlands, which was made feasible because of the good soil and abundant rainfall in the area (Ross, 1996). Malawi has been self-sufficient in maize production since the Government introduced a fertilizer subsidy programme in 2005, which leveraged the productive potential of

Malawi's vast smallholder sector (Dorward & Chirwa, 2011). Observations at food markets in Blantyre during the qualitative study revealed that most of the non-staple food was also produced domestically; fish came from Lake Malawi, Irish potatoes from Ntcheu District, bananas from Thyolo District, rice from Mangochi District. The difference in price between imported and domestically sourced produce underscored the economic benefits at the household level of consuming locally produced food. We observed potatoes imported from South Africa at a price of MWK 265 per kilogram, whereas domestically grown potatoes were never more than MWK 100 per kilogram. Even middle-class households, who could afford to shop at supermarkets, often opted for informal markets for daily food purchases. One man in his mid-thirties with two incomes, no children, and a car, seemed to be the very type of urban households that would be buying food at Shoprite, and yet he said they buy their vegetables at the informal market. He said the prices were far too high at Shoprite, adding: "maybe they know there's [sic] expatriate families going there to shop, as most of the goods there are imported, even vegetables."

The suitability of the area surrounding Blantyre to agricultural production clearly provided a foundation for the high levels of urban agriculture, but what was less evident in the survey was *where* urban households were farming. The qualitative study in Blantyre found that many households (27%) were going to their home villages to cultivate maize on an annual basis. In their home villages, they could use their customary rights to access farmland and in certain cases they could even access coupons for subsidized fertilizer. These entitlements depended on highly contextual factors beyond the scope of this paper (see Peters & Kambewa, 2007 for details on customary landholding practices in southern Malawi), but in general there was a pride in the ability to farm, which was bound up in the Malawian identity. The qualitative study in

Gaborone found a very different attitude toward farming and rural-urban linkages in general. While Batswana have been noted to live a transient lifestyle, moving frequently from city to rural homestead to plough field and cattle post, agricultural practices were more relevant to cultural adherence to an agrarian lifestyle than to the actual utility of the agricultural activities for urban food security. There was a general agreement that beyond livestock, there is very little that the countryside could provide by way of food. As such, food remittances from the rural area were limited to traditional delicacies such as the *mopane* worms. In fact, several households noted buying food in the city to take with them when they visit rural relatives or go plan of spending time in the rural area. Thus the meso-scale of the rural periphery of the city was far more important in Blantyre than in Gaborone for cultural, as well as economic and ecological reasons.

Born and Purcell (2006) argued persuasively that scale is not inherently good or bad, but rather the context of a given urban consumer center must be taken into account when advocating for "local food." The apparent success in Blantyre's relatively localized and informalized food system in addressing the needs of low-income urban households does not lead to a proscriptive argument for food sovereignty in Gaborone. In noting, "it is those actors and agendas that produce outcomes, not the scales through which the agendas were realized," Born and Purcell (2006: 199) reinforce the utility of scalar analysis for identifying actors and networks, eschewing the reification of scale itself. The actors in Blantyre are principally small food producers, residing in urban and rural areas, and small, informal traders also operating in rural and urban areas.

Governance also has relatively more actors in Blantyre because of the competition between traditional leaders, formal local government, national government, and civil society. In Gaborone, the dependence on large mining operations for national wealth, large farms for production, and multi-national corporations for distribution means that

there are fewer actors and agents. Although this spatially dispersed system provides a more reliable supply of food, it is less responsive to the needs of low-income urban households. The type of vulnerability here is linked to the global food economy and household cash incomes. In Blantyre, by contrast, low-income households have a wider variety of potential entitlements to draw on and more choices in where to buy food and what food to buy, which can help to mitigate the effects of having little cash available to buy food.

6. Conclusion

The comparison of urban food security in Blantyre and Gaborone in some ways mirrors the contrasting food security discourses in the Global North and the Global South, and yet both cities are in the same sub-region of sub-Saharan Africa. Thus from the outset the comparison challenges preconceived notions about cities and development and precludes any notion of a typical African city. Even more counter-intuitive to the accepted wisdom about the link between development and poverty alleviation was the observation that households in less-developed Blantyre were far more likely than households in more-developed Gaborone to be food secure. We have brought in several observations about the relative contexts of environment, governance, history, and economies that have allowed us to dissect these findings and show that low-income households in each city are vulnerable to events at different scales. While the contrast between the two cities in the AFSUN survey was probably overstated because of the particular times and places in which the survey was conducted in each city, the findings nonetheless provide a firm foundation for drawing insights into why urban poverty persists even as countries and cities proceed along proscribed developmental paths. Economic growth and the provision of urban services and infrastructures do not

inherently provide improvements in urban food security, and may in fact introduce new forms of vulnerability embedded in the global capitalist food system.

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