

The Need for a Diverse and Responsive Food System

Dr Jane Battersby

We have all been warned about “putting all of our eggs in one basket”. We are constantly advised to keep our options open. Financial managers recommend investors diversify their portfolios to manage risk. So why doesn’t this logic follow through when considering what kind of food system works best to ensure food security?

The economist Paul Seabright recalls a conversation with an ex-Soviet official:

“About two years after the breakup of the Soviet Union I was in discussion with a senior Russian official whose job it was to direct the production of bread in St. Petersburg. “Please understand that we are keen to move towards a market system”, he told me. “But we need to understand the fundamental details of how such a system works. Tell me, for example: who is in charge of the supply of bread to the population of London?” There was nothing naive about his question, because the answer (“nobody is in charge”), when one thinks carefully

about it, is astonishingly hard to believe. Only in the industrialised West have we forgotten just how strange it is.”(Seabright 2010, 10)

Food systems undergoing transformations

Food systems, particularly within Africa, are undergoing rapid and profound transformations, and yet little consideration has been given to what these transformations might mean for the food security of urban residents who depend on the food system for their food security. Even less thought has been given to what these changes might mean in the context of climate change.

The logic of leaving food to the market to deliver is based on the assumption that an efficient market will ensure positive food security outcomes (guaranteeing reliable access of nutritious food to all consumers). Is this necessarily the case? This article is based on the idea that household food security is built on five pillars: availability, accessibility, acceptability, adequacy and agency. Are current trends in the food system moving to being able to create an environment in which this kind of food security can be achieved?



Local traders buy from a range of sources Photo: Caron von Zeil

The emergence of supermarkets

One of the most significant changes in the food system within Africa has been the emergence of the supermarket as a key component of the system. The South African company Shoprite opened its first non-South African store in 1995, and by the end of 2012 it had 131 non-South African stores in 16 African countries. The increased presence of the supermarkets impacts the whole food chain, from production to consumption. Some have argued that the entry of supermarkets may prove to be an “urban food security boon” as they have the capacity to deliver food at lower prices than other forms of market (Reardon & Minten 2011). It is further argued that they provide better quality and safer food to consumers. They are also argued to have benefits for farmers, as they guarantee prices and often provide on-farm investment. On the other hand, some have expressed concern about the impact of the rise of the supermarkets on food sovereignty and food security. The control of the food chain by these large players undermines the autonomy and viability of small farmers, processors and other actors along the food value chain. Small traders are often unable to compete with the supermarkets on per-unit price. The economic viability of local small traders, precarious to start with, is furthermore undermined by the supermarkets that often enter new locations with a series of opening discounts. Concerns have also been expressed that, although these stores might provide cheaper access to food, they are also serving as gateways to mainly highly-processed, unhealthy foods. What, then, do the changes in the urban food system — most evident in the expansion of the supermarket, but also characterised by a suite of production and consumption transitions — mean for the resilience of the system to climate change and other shocks and stresses? To answer that question it is necessary to look at the everyday practices of residents as they engage the food system, and the practices of the informal traders. The focus here is on case studies conducted in Cape Town, South Africa, but many of the experiences here are not unique to the city.

The importance of local traders

Work conducted by The African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) in 2008 asked households in three low-income areas of Cape Town where they accessed food. Virtually every household accessed some food in supermarkets, but with low frequency. On a day-to-day basis households got food from informal traders and street food sellers. There were also substantial proportions of households that got food through various social networks, borrowing food from neighbours and sharing meals with neighbours, for example (Battersby 2011). Less than five percent were eating any food they had grown, in part due to the poor soil and particular climatic conditions of the region. Further research found that households navigate their different sources of food according to product and time. The supermarkets were preferred at the start of the month when households would buy non-perishables in bulk, but the informal traders were viewed as better when money was short and they could only afford to buy the bulk-broken units sold by the traders. The informal traders were also seen to be more responsive to local needs in terms of their longer opening hours which were more attuned to

In South Africa there is an ad hoc approach to food planning on national level. Food is more seen as a rural issue – with a focus on production – and there is little consideration for urban food challenges. Cape Town struggles with a general lack of knowledge and understanding regarding food system issues and opportunities. Does the current food system respond to the needs of the rapidly expanding city, and particularly to the needs of the poorest of the poor? What should be the response of the City Council to food governance (food planning, regulation, food security interventions, etc.)? Which department should be the main driver? To answer these questions the City Council has recently commissioned a comprehensive study on the city's food system and food security to inform its firm and decisive response to food system governance and food system failures.

Source: Stanley Visser, Municipality of Cape Town

the long working hours and commuting times of residents; in terms of their locations that could be more easily accessed on the way from work to home or closer to home; and through their granting of credit to “buy” food when the money inevitably ran out as the month's end neared. Residents also preferentially bought meat and fresh produce from informal traders. Having this wide range of possible sources of food made it possible for poor households to have some form of resilience to shocks such as price increases in one retail sector, or the monthly shock of running out of money.

Food systems are undergoing rapid changes. Little consideration has been given to what these changes might mean in the context of climate change

The practices of fresh-produce traders illustrate another layer of resilience embedded in the food system. These fresh-produce traders have to be responsive to customer needs in terms of both price and quality. Their customer base cannot afford to pay high prices for fresh produce, so the traders must locate the best quality produce at the lowest price. Because both customers and traders lack refrigeration, they must re-stock frequently to ensure good quality produce. In order to meet demands of quality and price, the traders buy their stock from multiple sources a number of times per week. Informal traders have a range of buying strategies and are therefore able to respond on a day-to-day basis to changing conditions. They buy from the official Cape Town Fresh



Local food trader in Cape Town Photo: Andreas Barth

Produce Market, from the large traders who operate outside of the market, from local wholesalers and directly from local farms and urban agriculture. Because price fluctuations ripple through these different sources at different rates, the traders are able to navigate the food system to ensure the lowest possible prices.

Resilience within the local food system

There is therefore considerable resilience within the local food system that enables traders and customers to access food from a range of sources with a range of supply chains. The food system is therefore able to meet the needs of households as they respond to changing circumstances — be it through accessing food via different market sources, or through the dense social networks that exist around food. In the longer term, the multiple sources of food and the multiple means by which food reaches the city, through the formal and informal trade systems as well as local and distant production, generate a more systemic resilience. If an extreme weather event destroys either local crops, as it did in Cape Town's hinterlands in November, or crops from more distant production locations, it is still possible to get those products from elsewhere. If food prices in the formal sector spike because of fuel price increases, or as a result of climate change negatively affecting crop yields, the local networks of the informal traders may mitigate against these price shocks. To return to the metaphor: having eggs in multiple baskets creates some form of resilience in the food system. In the context of this system, how then can the entry of the supermarkets be understood? While the supermarkets undoubtedly provide a means for often cheaper, generally safer food to enter the market, there are concerns that their presence undermines the local food retailers. The problem is that, although the supermarkets provide one means to buy food, they are far less responsive to the needs of low-income

households in terms of the volumes they trade in, the hours they operate, their location and their inability to offer credit. Should the smaller retailers be lost, the most vulnerable to food insecurity will lose a vital source of food, and the smaller farmers will lose a vital market.

Planning for a diverse food system

Policy makers and planners have been blind to the impact of supermarkets on the food system and have assumed that market efficiency has downstream benefits for the poor. This is simply not the case. Not only are the supermarkets not always accessible to the poor, but they also undermine the viability of systems that have developed in response to local needs and local food value chains. If we fail to plan for a food system that is self-consciously diverse and responsive to local needs and a range of systemic (and future, projected, increased climate change) shocks, we are in danger of creating one very large, very shiny and very fragile basket to put all of our eggs into.

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