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(Photo source: Caron von Zeil)

Executive Summary

South Africa's towns and cities experience high levels of food insecurity.¹ Although municipalities have no direct mandate to address food insecurity, many municipalities have attempted to alleviate food insecurity. These efforts have generally focused on the promotion of urban agriculture. However, the vast majority of urban residents obtain the vast majority of their food via market sources, formal and informal. This policy brief argues that the informal food retail sector is an important contributor to the food security of the urban poor, and therefore requires greater policy attention.

Supermarkets and informal food traders are important components of the urban food system and deliver different food security benefits to urban residents. Although supermarkets are generally cheaper per unit food, and are recognized to have higher food safety standards, they are not always responsive to the food security needs of the poor. Informal food retailers, including spazas and street traders, sell in smaller unit sizes, operate for longer hours and will often offer credit. These make them an important contributor to household food security. Therefore, a mix of retail types is important to ensure food security for the poor.

At present municipalities do not consider the food retail sector, and their role in shaping the food retail environment, as an element in ensuring food security. As a result local government planning and management of food retail, formal and informal, takes a purely local economic development or livelihoods approach. Informal traders have been over-regulated on the basis of food safety.

There is a need for a new approach to food security. Although there is a lack of formal mandate for local government, there are many activities taking place within existing mandates that impact the food system and therefore food security. Municipalities should therefore assess their role in enhancing or hindering food security. This policy brief recommends the following: a) Integrated (formal and informal sector) food retail planning should be a component of any food security strategy; b) The sale of healthy foods near transport hubs should be incentivized; and c) Municipalities should engage informal trader associations to co-develop appropriate means to ensure food safety.

Background

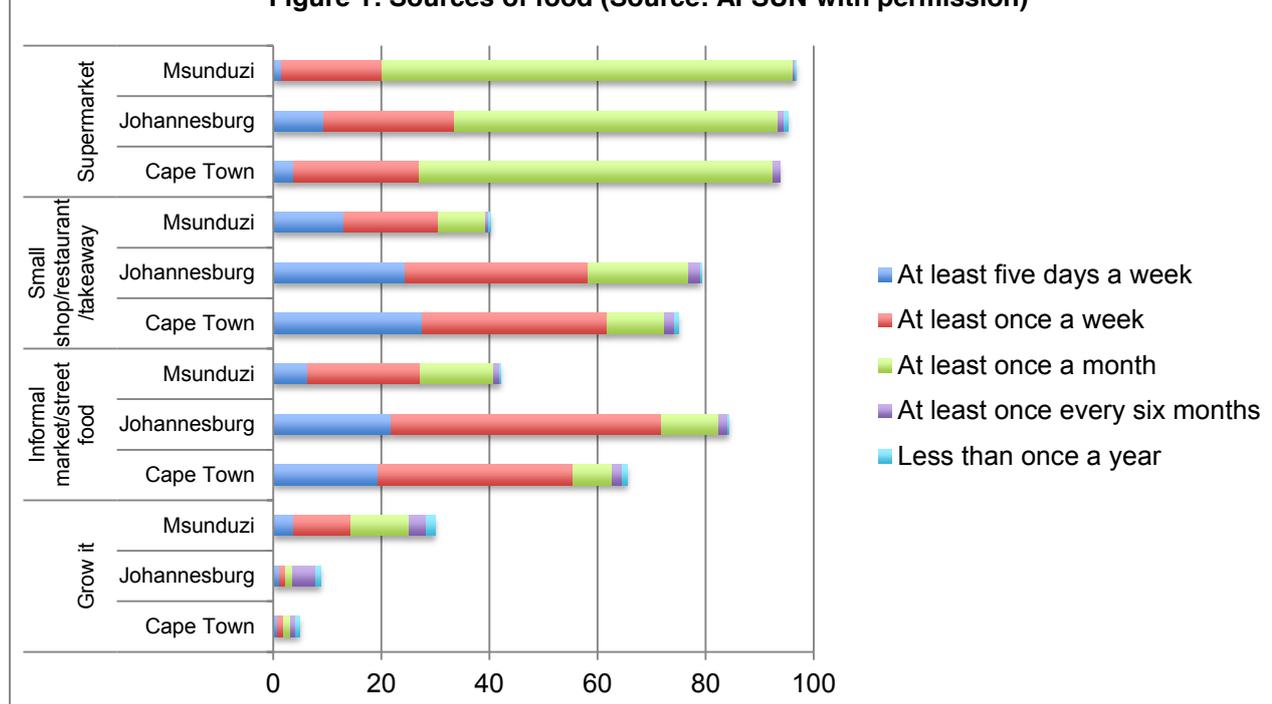
There are high levels of food insecurity in South Africa's towns and cities. The SANHANES survey found national prevalence of households at risk hunger to be 28% and experiencing hunger, 26%. The equivalent figures in urban informal areas were 32% and 36% respectively.

Municipal responses to food insecurity have centred on the promotion of urban agriculture. Because of the dominant framing of food insecurity as a rural problem, national and provincial programmes and policies have failed to focus on urban food insecurity. There is no formal mandate for municipalities to address food insecurity.

Attempts to alleviate food insecurity are informed by national and provincial programming priorities, and are therefore predominantly based on the promotion of urban agriculture.

The vast majority of urban residents obtain the vast majority of their food via formal and informal market sources. Despite the programmatic focus on urban agriculture, the market is the most important source of food for households in all income categories. Research conducted by AFSUN found that virtually all households buy food from supermarkets. Low-income households use supermarkets for bulk purchases of foods, particularly non-perishables, on an infrequent basis. They will buy from the spazas and street vendors on a day-to-day basis, for a variety of reasons (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sources of food (Source: AFSUN with permission)



Although supermarkets are often assumed to provide better access to cheap, nutritious foods, they do not necessarily meet the food security needs of the poor. Supermarkets are expanding rapidly into lower-income areas and are considered by some to be a boon for urban food security. However, they often do not sell in unit sizes that are appropriate for the urban poor, are often not well-located for pedestrian residents, do not offer credit and have limited opening hours. There are concerns that supermarkets in lower income areas are conduits for cheap, highly processed foods, thereby creating an obesogenic environment.

The informal food retail sector is more responsive to the food security needs of the poor than the supermarket sector. Although the informal food retailers are often more expensive per unit, they are by design more attuned to the retail needs of the poor. Poor households often have only small amounts of money and limited

storage and refrigeration. They therefore, make small and frequent purchases. Informal retailers sell in appropriate unit sizes. Towards the end of the month poor households often run out of household cash. Many informal retailers will offer credit to regular customers. Because of the urban form and poor transport infrastructure, many households have long commutes and get home only after the supermarkets close. Informal sector food retailers have longer opening hours, and street vendors sell ready-to-eat foods. However, informal traders, being dependent on selling most profitable food stuffs, also sell increasing amounts of highly processed foods, further promoting obesity.

Household food security is determined by the availability and accessibility of food, as well as households ability to utilize the food they have access to. Access is often assumed to depend on income, however access is also spatially determined. The location of sources of food is

therefore an important determinant of urban food security.

Food safety is an important consideration when promoting informal food retail.

Municipalities have an important regulatory role in ensuring that food sold by formal and informal food

retailers is safe for consumption. There is a need to ensure that appropriate regulation strategies are developed which promote food safety, without undermining business viability.

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of retail types for food security (Source Battersby forthcoming)

	Pros	Cons
Supermarkets	Lower prices per unit Higher safety standards Large range of foods	Unit sizes unaffordable for poorest Inconvenient locations Limited opening hours No credit offered
Spazas	Affordable unit sizes for the poor Sale of food on credit Long opening hours Convenient locations	More expensive than supermarkets per unit weight Perceived low quality of food Limited range of foods
Fresh Produce Traders	Convenient location for daily purchase Produce restocked daily Often cheaper than supermarkets	Limited shelf life of produce due to lack of cold chain
Meat Traders and Livestock Traders	Cultural preferences Range of cuts of meat, including "fifth quarter" Argued to taste better (live chicken)	Food safety

Critique of Existing Policy

There is currently no acknowledgement of the role of retail in food security within local government food security policy or programming. Municipalities have tended to frame food insecurity only through the lens of urban agriculture. Some municipal IDPs have begun to engage wider systemic issues which include food retail, such as:

- 1) Recognising the role of the Fresh Produce Market as a means to generate a more inclusive food system (Buffalo City)
- 2) Recognising the municipal role in the characteristics of value chains (Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg)
- 3) Recognising the need for planning to consider the generation of food networks (Ekurhuleni), and the need to understand the spatial determinants of food insecurity (Johannesburg, Mangaung)

Municipal policies and programmes to support the informal sector are framed in terms of livelihoods, rather than the services provided by the sector to the local community. The

promotion of economically viable livelihoods may have negative food and nutrition security outcomes. For example, if the retail of highly processed foods is more viable than the sale of fresh produce, vendors will sell these foods. This provides a viable livelihood, but undermines local nutrition security.

Although Municipalities have programmes and policies to promote the informal sector, there are concerns about over-regulation of the sector. The departments tasked with promoting informal trade are often under-capacitated and therefore tend towards regulating rather than creating an enabling environment. This has led to crack-downs for minor non-compliance issues which undermine businesses. Inclusive ways to address the environmental health concerns associated with informal sector food retail need to be developed.

There is no municipal planning for food retail environments, formal or informal. Decisions about the location of new supermarkets and other formal food retail sites (such as fast food chains) are determined by local economic development

decisions, which do not include food security as a component.

The food retail environment is profoundly shaped by municipal planning, but is never consciously planned. The spatial characteristics of the urban food retail system are the by-product of planning decisions made by departments planning formal retail and informal sector activities. These do not consider the impact on food security of planning decisions. They also generally do not work together to plan holistic retail environments.

Recommendations

Municipalities should extend their food security programming beyond urban agriculture and take a wider food systems perspective. Although there is no direct mandate for food security for local government, many municipal functions have an impact on the food system and therefore food security. Municipalities therefore need to develop food system strategies that acknowledge the multiple roles they can play within their existing mandates.

Municipalities should include food retail planning within food security considerations.

Municipalities should develop a position on retail mix for food security to ensure access to affordable, nutritious, hygienic and culturally appropriate foods at all times. This should include bringing departments that oversee the development of shopping malls and those that manage informal retail together to work through an integrated vision for food retail. There is also scope for considering incentivisation of healthier foods, and perhaps regulation of the sale of less healthy foods.

There is a concentration of food retailers near transport hubs. Municipalities should ensure that these are priority zones for healthy food retail. Pilot projects should be developed to incentivize the sale of healthy foods around transport hubs, such as preferential trading rights, improved infrastructure for retailers selling healthier foods. These are key sites for food purchases by the urban poor and can therefore impact on food and nutrition security.

Municipalities should engage informal trader associations to co-develop appropriate means to ensure food safety. These could include ensuring the municipal collection of refuse from areas near meat trading clusters happens after, rather than before, busy times of the week.

Municipalities can also work with NGOs and industry to develop appropriate, thermally inert storage to reduce food waste.

References

Battersby, J., Haysom, G., Tawodzera, G., Kroll, F., Marshak, M. (2015) A study on current and future realities of urban food security in South Africa, Report for the South African Cities Network.

ⁱ For the purpose of this study, the WHO/FAO definition of food security has been adopted: "Food security is ... the situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (WHO/FAO 1996).