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# Towards democratic urban food systems governance: Re-interpreting the urban food security mandate

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# **Towards democratic urban food systems governance:**

## **Re-interpreting the urban food security mandate**

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## Executive Summary

Although South Africa is food security at a national level, there is widespread household food insecurity. Despite clear evidence of high levels of urban food insecurity, the problem is generally framed as being predominantly rural. This has led to a neglect of urban considerations in food security policies and programmes at the national and provincial levels, and an approach that fails to consider the systemic drivers of food insecurity. This has left local government without a clear mandate to address food insecurity.

Although National policies and strategies continue to neglect the drivers of urban food security, the 2014 National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security does identify a role for local government. The National Development Plan argues for a more complex understanding of food security and its possible solutions. Although the vast majority of local government food security initiatives focus on urban agriculture, there are indications that a more systemic approach is being considered.

This policy brief calls for national government to formally acknowledge the mandate for food security to local government, and for provincial government to provide more scope for local government to drive the provincial urban food security agenda. The South African Cities Network has an important role to play in driving these processes, and in providing opportunities for horizontal learning. The brief argues that local governments should seek to maximise their food security programming and interventions within their existing mandates and develop over-arching food security and food system strategies, which address sustainability issues and vulnerabilities to mega-trends. Finally, it argues that food systems governance should be recognised as an intervention with multiple benefits and returns on investment.

## Background

**South Africa is food secure at a national level. It currently either produces enough food to feed its residents, or is able to cover the cost of food imports through a trade surplus from agricultural exports. However, it is not food secure at a household level. This means that many households lack adequate access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods.**

**There are high levels of food insecurity in South Africa's towns and cities.** The SANHANES (South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey) 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. Approximately two thirds of urban populations in SA cannot afford a basic healthy food basket.

**Food insecurity in cities is driven by the complex structure and trends of South African food systems** - the stakeholders, activities, interactions, regulations and power dynamics spanning food production, processing, warehousing and distribution, marketing and sales.

**Food systems governance is largely driven by highly concentrated private-sector interests** The South African food system has become increasingly consolidated in the last two decades. As a result, much food systems data is proprietary, contributing to significant knowledge gaps around urban food systems, while food systems governance is neither transparent nor democratic.

**Urban food systems in South Africa face severe sustainability issues, contribute to environmental degradation and are vulnerable to megatrends** including climate change, energy system instability, water scarcity, soil loss, waste and pollution, macro-economic debt, GMOs and biodiversity loss. These vulnerabilities pose a threat to food system resilience and could trigger sudden food systems failure and rapid increases of urban food insecurity. Such trends would entail severe public health challenges, exacerbate social tensions and undermine urban governance and security.

**However, food security has been understood to be a predominantly rural phenomenon. As a result the vast majority of food security programming has focussed on rural areas.** This belief has been reinforced by the ways in which data are aggregated. Percentages and absolute numbers have been consistently blurred leading to misinterpretation of the extent of food insecurity in different locations. For example, the Western Cape's Department of Social Development's current Strategic Plan indicates that because the proportion of rural households experience food security is higher than the proportion of urban

households (27% versus 22.7%), food insecurity is more prevalent in rural areas. However, some 90% of the Western Cape's households are urban dwellers. This means that 294 120 urban households are food insecure, compared to just 44 118 rural households. This blurring of percentages and absolute numbers is also evidence in the Integrated Food Security Strategy, which guides all food security interventions.

**As a result of this lack of recognition of urban food security, there is no formally-acknowledged mandate for local governments to address food insecurity.** However, local government has a variety of existing regulatory, planning and management mandates and instruments that provide leverage to influence food systems, for example through environmental safety and health, SDFs, IDPs, Town Planning Schemes, Transport Master Plans, Open Space Plans, Environmental Impact Assessments and through institutions such as fresh produce markets and abattoirs. These points of leverage are not currently coherently addressed or utilised to influence food security outcomes.

**Where local governments have attempted to address food insecurity, their actions have been guided by national and provincial programming. This has led to a dominance of urban agriculture as the primary intervention.**

## Critique of Existing Policy

**Current policies and strategies do not engage with food security from a systemic perspective. They do not explicitly recognise their role and potential to influence other stages of the food system through existing mandates in urban planning and management.**

The 2002 Integrated Food Security Strategy aimed to integrate previously fragmented policy. Coordinated by DAFF it aimed to bring together departments in a collaborative manner. While an important development, it has widely critiqued for its lack of action. Further, the policy does not integrate the complexities of the urban scale or role of local government.

The 2014 National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security also coordinated by DAFF aims to "to serve as a guide to national, provincial" - and importantly "local government in working towards food and nutrition security at every level" (DAFF, 2014,29). It aims to "maximize synergy between the different strategies and programmes of government and civil society" (DAFF, 2014,28). However the policy continues to identify food

insecurity as primarily a rural problem. This is, in part, due to the fact that DAFF is a Nationally and provincially scaled department with little presence at municipal scale.

**The lack of a municipal focus in national food security policy is of vital importance as it influences the development of local level policy.**

A review of Municipal IDPs and other policy has illustrated that many draw on the national rural food security bias within policy and stemming from this position urban food production as their policy response therefore not overall adequately engaging with more complex urban food security issues surrounding this.

**There are, however, a number of points of innovation that suggest a wider conceptualisation of appropriate responses to food insecurity is possible.** These include:

- 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)
- 4) Connecting food security to climate change mitigation strategies (eThekweni, Cape Town)
- 5) Developing a co-ordinated multi-pronged approach to food security (Johannesburg)
- 6) The need to engage stakeholders outside of municipal government (Johannesburg)
- 7) Conducting baseline evaluations to determine different levels of food security in different municipal wards (Johannesburg)

**The 2012 NDP offers important food and nutrition security guidance, offering a broader and more systemic approach and emphasising the importance of inter-departmental collaborations to address these complexities.**

While the recent 2014 Draft IUDF does not explicitly engage with food systems, like the NDP, the IUDF calls for inter-sectoral collaboration and taking this further it specifically speaks to the importance of geographical and spatial links

**Urban planning and management strategies and instruments do not adequately consider food security, and where it is a consideration, it defaults to urban agriculture.** Monitoring and evaluation of current initiatives is poor, limiting assessment of their effectiveness and the potential for learning from good practice.

**Local government capacity to engage with the complexity, sensitivity and cross-departmental nature of food systems governance is limited due to constraints in funding, personnel, knowledge, skills and infrastructure.**

## Recommendations

**National government should be encouraged to recognize the existing mandate for local government to address food insecurity, as alluded to in the new Food and Nutrition Security Policy.** In order to do this, it is essential that national government is provided with data and information explaining the extent and drivers of urban food insecurity. A directive from national government is essential in order to provide motivation for local government to proactively address food insecurity.

**Provincial government should provide more scope for local government to drive the provincial urban food security agenda.** At present municipalities may be part of provincial working groups, but they are largely expected to implement strategies and programmes rather than formulate them. This has led to the perpetuation of predominantly rural-focussed strategies being implemented in urban areas, rather than strategies designed to be responsive to urban needs.

**The South African Cities Network should play a role in lobbying national government and providing voice for local governments.** The South African Cities Network represents a collective voice for the metros and is beginning to work with secondary cities as well. Individual municipalities may lack voice in engaging national government to request greater recognition of urban food security, including motivating for improved modes of data collection and aggregation from StatsSA. The Network can play an important role in providing a coherent voice.



**The South African Cities Network should play a role in connecting local governments to each other to encourage horizontal learning.** Various municipalities are attempting new approaches to food insecurity. The Network can play a role in facilitating cross-municipality learning and serve as an archiving hub for urban food security resources.

**Local governments should maximize their food security programming and interventions within their existing mandates.** Local governments have tended to consider their food system role as providing access to urban agriculture. However, when the food system as a whole is considered, it becomes clear that local government plays a much wider role in shaping the characteristics and trends seen within the food system. There is a need therefore to acknowledge these existing roles and to consider how the local government can work with other food system stakeholders to enhance urban food security through coherent food system interventions within existing mandates. This could include, for example, integrated planning of the food retail environment, especially along transport corridors and nodes, support for informal food retailers, restrictions on advertising of unhealthy foods in public spaces or deferment of supermarket waste from landfill.

**Local government should develop an overarching food security and food system strategy.** This would involve the development of a Food Charter, which can be used to raise awareness of the issue within local government and wider stakeholders and to build consensus. It would also act as a stakeholder engagement strategy including a food systems governance council consisting of a small, core group of stakeholders that will be engaged on an ongoing basis, and a larger group who can be engaged at specific points on specific projects. Where feasible, it is recommended that municipalities establish working groups for food system knowledge management and innovation. It is essential that these structures be formally institutionalised, well-resourced, and have the necessary clout to encourage change.

## References

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