A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment
2020 VISION

ACHIEVING URBAN FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

FEEDING THE CITIES: FOOD SUPPLY AND DISTRIBUTION

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Urban expansion and issues of food supply and distribution to and in the cities have four major consequences for urban food security. The first is the competition between demands for land needed for housing, industry, and infrastructure and land needed for agricultural production within and around cities. Agriculturally productive lands are likely to be lost in this competition.

The second consequence is the increasing quantities of food that must be brought into cities and distributed within the expanding urban areas (see table). This means more trucks coming into cities, contributing to traffic congestion and air pollution. It also means additional stress on existing food distribution infrastructure and facilities, most of which are already inefficient, unhygienic, and environmentally unfriendly.

The third consequence is the modification of consumption habits and food purchasing behaviors. Consumers in urban areas—who generally pay up to 30 percent more for their food compared with their rural counterparts—have less time to spend preparing food. Therefore, the demand for more convenience and processed meals increases, raising issues of food quality and safety in terms of the use of appropriate inputs, particularly safe water, in food processing.

The final consequence for urban food security is the likelihood that low-income urban households will reside farther and farther away from food markets, often in slums that do not have water, roads, or electricity. Since these households are also less likely to have refrigerators, they face additional time and transport costs in accessing food daily.

As urban expansion continues apace, the overall cost of supplying, distributing, and accessing food is likely to increase further and, with it, the number of urban households that are food insecure. The challenge of feeding cities therefore lies in facilitating consumer access to food and ensuring that required investments are forthcoming for increasing food production, processing, and distribution capacities and services under hygienic, healthy, and environmentally sound conditions. Adequately meeting this challenge will promote the development of peri-urban and rural areas.

FOOD SUPPLY PROBLEMS

To feed ever-growing cities, more food will have to be imported or produced in areas presently under cultivation or on new lands (which are likely to be more distant and less productive).

EXPECTED LEVEL OF FOOD CONSUMPTION IN SELECTED CITIES, 2000 AND 2010

City	2000	2010
	(1,000 metric tons)	
Yaoundé	3,030	5,752
Nairobi	4,805	7,984
Isfahan	13,000	20,500
Karachi	41,800	63,900
Lima	19,276	24,567
Port-au-Prince	2,934	4,450
Managua	2,782	4,075

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAOSTAT and *Food into Cities* (2000).
Note: Data are based on national food consumption averages.

Urban and peri-urban agriculture can be an important source of food for some cities, especially when the national rural food production, marketing, and transportation systems are not well developed. However, urban and peri-urban agriculture pose a number of problems that stem from their close proximity to densely populated areas, with animals and humans sharing the same air, water, and soil resources. Inappropriate use of chemicals and solid and liquid wastes in farming can contaminate food, soil, and water resources used for drinking and food processing. Raising livestock in and close to urban areas may also increase health risks for residents. While many of the problems could be solved by information and extension assistance, local city authorities have often responded instead by destroying food crops and evicting food producers from public lands.

Much of the expected higher cost of feeding cities is likely to be accounted for by transportation costs as well as by postharvest food losses from inappropriate food handling and packaging, the need to collect food from a large number of small farmers, and frequent delays from road check points and (often illegal) taxation. These food losses can be as high as 35 percent for perishable food products, while transportation costs can reach as high as 90 percent of the overall food marketing margin.

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FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROBLEMS

In developing countries, a large share of food passes through wholesale markets and is then redistributed within the urban area through retail markets, shops, street sellers, and supermarkets, all of which have problems. Many wholesale markets are old, have not adapted to the increase in food quantities, are not properly managed and maintained, and are in areas that urban expansion has transformed into central, high-density spots. The latter factor increases traffic congestion and eliminates space for market expansion. Storage facilities, particularly cold storage, are insufficient or badly managed or both. These difficulties create additional costs and losses for traders and lead to increased food contamination.

At the retail level, supermarkets and hypermarkets (combined supermarkets and department stores) play only a minor role in urban food distribution in developing economies. Even in Latin American cities this sector accounts for only 30 percent of food retail sales, even though it has developed rapidly since the 1970s. Such markets usually cater to the needs of high-income families, are located in middle- to high-income urban areas, and distribute mainly manufactured food products and imports. Staples produced locally are only a small part of these markets' food sales. They usually rely instead on direct contracts with distant food producers for their supplies.

The traditional retail food sector dominates developing-country markets, making it central to improving food distribution in cities. But public retail markets, which tend to be concentrated in city centers, are usually congested, unhealthy, and insecure. Spontaneous markets are often seen by local city authorities as a cause of traffic, health, and safety problems, and the sellers are consequently harassed by municipal police. In recent times many cities have experienced a steep rise in informal-sector retailing, which fills an important gap in the distribution chain because it is a convenient source of cheap food for low-income urban consumers. It also serves as an important source of revenue for low-income households engaged in these activities.

THE ROLE OF CITY AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Most city and local authorities believe that food supply and distribution issues are not their responsibility and instead concentrate on public health, education, housing, sanitation, and transport. However, these authorities affect food supply and distribution systems directly or indirectly through, for example, health and housing regulations and construction and management of processing and market infrastructure. Fortunately, awareness is growing of the need for city and local authorities to play a proactive and coordinating role in actions to improve urban food security. City authorities need to adopt policies that support those involved in food supply and distribution activities by promoting private investment, getting involved in food supply and distribution themselves (by facilitating urban and peri-urban agriculture and by providing the necessary planning, infrastructure, facilities, services, information, and regulations), coordinating public and private development initiatives, and mediating between the central government and the private food sector.

When formulating food supply and distribution policies and strategies, city and local authorities should rely on four strategic principles: (1) adopt an approach that is consultative, participatory, open-minded, alliance-seeking, and technically sound and involves the private sector; (2) promote competition and reduce the influence of large intermediaries; (3) leave to the private sector facilities and services that can best be run as businesses; and (4) encourage effective development that lowers the cost of living and stimulates employment growth in the city. City and local authorities can also play a crucial role in national food-security policies by complementing efforts by farmers' associations and local rural authorities to lobby governments on projects and programs that will reduce food production and marketing constraints.

City and local authorities also need to support urban and peri-urban agriculture with information campaigns to minimize adverse health and environmental consequences and with appropriately enforced regulations that allow and facilitate urban and peri-urban agricultural activities.

City and local authorities can play a fundamental role in ensuring that food distribution issues are appropriately considered when new infrastructure, facilities, and services are being planned. These considerations include location, type, and standards of the services and structures, as well as the financial capacity of the users, in order to enable them to pay usage fees and keep up market facilities. Other key issues are the management of markets and the criteria for allocating space for building markets.

While much of the food production and distribution is out of the control of city and local authorities, these authorities must coordinate with other organizations that are major stakeholders in the food production and distribution system, and they should promote and support policies that ensure urban food security and stimulate private investment as well as private participation in planning decisions. Only if low-income urban households have access to affordable, good-quality food through the programs and policies noted here can they achieve food security. ■

For further reading see Olivio Argenti, "Urban Food Security and Food Marketing: A Challenge to Cities and Local Authorities," Food into Cities Collection, DT/40-99E (Rome: FAO, 1999); and FAO, "Food for the Cities: Food Supply and Distribution Policies to Reduce Urban Food Insecurity," Food into Cities Collection, DT/43-00E (Rome: FAO, 2000). Freely available from http://www.fao.org/ag/sada.htm.

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