

Nourishing Spaces Project
Policy Brief

Urban Food Security in Kisumu in light of COVID19

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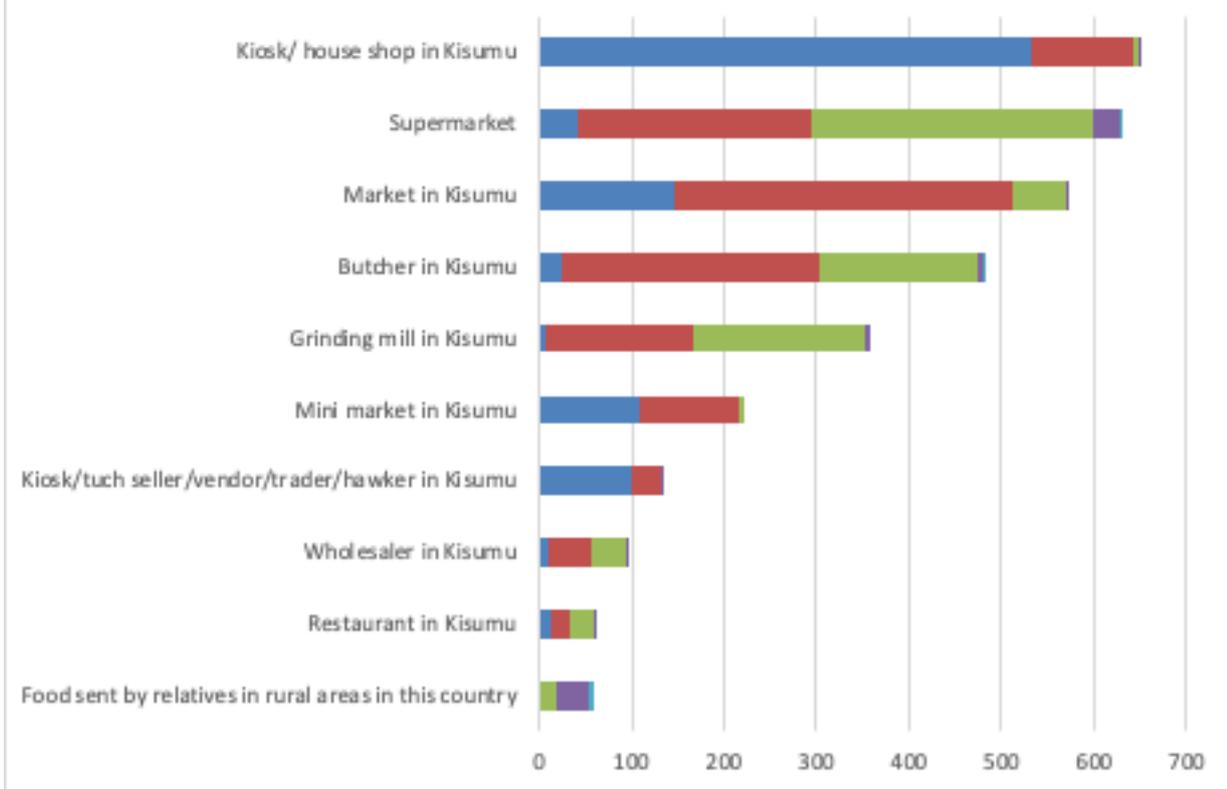


Photo 1: Informal food retailers in Kisumu streets: Hundreds are now out of work due to COVID19 pandemic. (Photo courtesy of CUP)

This policy brief is informed by the findings of two research projects done in Kisumu over the last four years: 1) the ESRC/DfID-funded 'Governing Food Systems to Alleviate Poverty in Secondary Cities in Africa' (Branded *Consuming Urban Poverty*); and 2) the IDRC-funded 'Urban Food

Systems Governance for Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention in Africa' (Branded *Nourishing Spaces*). The two projects generated data on urban food security and food systems governance. COVID19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on some of the issues raised by the four

Figure 1 Ten most frequently used sources of food, Kisumu, Kenya, 2016.
This includes both market and non-market sources.



years of food systems research in Kisumu, including pre-existing high food insecurity, disrupted food system, vulnerability due to inadequate infrastructure, and increasing NCDs co-morbidities.

Pre-existing high levels of food insecurity

Kisumu city experiences high levels of food insecurity – as do most cities in sub Saharan Africa. The Consuming Urban Poverty project’s city-wide household survey found that 71.3% of households were either moderately or severely food insecure, with nutritionally deficient diets. Despite these high levels of food insecurity, policymakers continue to view the food and nutrition insecurity as a predominantly rural challenge.

Less than 15% of the sampled households produced any of their own food. Kisumu’s residents therefore buy the vast majority of

the food they consume. A regular cash income is therefore central to household food security. The economic downturn in the city occasioned by COVID19 has diminished cash income for households - in which the CUP survey established that 39% of members were either working or pensioners supporting the balance of the population (62%) who were children, students, unemployed, home keepers, or medically unfit or disabled. With more people out of work due to COVID19, more residents have been pushed to food insecurity.

Disruption of food supply chains

The CUP survey established that that many of the key food stuffs in the Kisumu urban diet were sourced from well beyond Kisumu County boundaries. COVID19 has disrupted global and local food supply chains, with

negative impacts on food security. The situation in Kisumu has been worsened by floods displacing hundreds of households and destroying farmlands in the hinterland. The recent floods have also damaged the road network, further hindering food delivery to the city. Closure of markets, for example Kibuye market, which is the largest wholesale market in the city, and eviction of informal food retailers from the roadsides due to social distancing rules has further disrupted food supply in the city. Market women who used to receive food early in the morning for sale in residential areas incur further costs in getting food from the temporary market created outside the stadium to reduce congestion at Kibuye.

The partial lockdown (curfew) imposed to contain the spread of COVID19 has also affected food distribution and access in Kisumu. The government allowed food delivery trucks to continue operating during curfew hours. This has enabled formal food transporters to continue delivering food to supermarkets normally. However, informal transporters who deliver food to the city have been severely affected by the curfew. This bias is also manifested in the opening hours, as supermarkets are classified as essential services and are allowed to operate during curfew hours. Informal food retailers and corner shops in residential areas are not classified as essential services, yet majority of residents buy food from these sources. In the Consuming Urban Poverty survey, three quarters of households bought less than half their food at supermarkets.

Informal traders and food security

Informal food retailers provide food to more than 75 per cent of households on a day to day basis (Figure 1). The role of informal food retailers is key in food provisioning for the poor. They provide food on credit and sell food in smaller measures affordable to low-paid wage earners.

Informal food retail is also a source of employment for a large number of people, particularly women, who own and operate more than 70 per cent of food retail outlets in Kisumu (Photo 1). A large proportion of these traders is unable to sell due to partial lockdown conditions.

Vulnerability of the urban poor to NCDs and COVID19

In Kisumu, the urban poor living in informal settlements of Manyatta, Nyalenda, Obunga, and Bandani are at greater risk of infection by COVID19 than those in wealthier areas. Physical distancing and personal hygiene practices being advocated for are almost impossible in these neighbourhoods. For example, there is a high risk of exposure to the virus in communal water points and toilets. The poor would be severely affected as the environments in which they live predispose them to other infectious diseases; and to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like hypertension, diabetes and obesity. Nourishing Spaces project work in Bandani in 2019 found that prevalence of NCDs is growing among the urban poor. The combination of high risk living conditions with comorbidities increases both the risk of transmission and of severity of COVID19 symptoms or even mortality.

Policy suggestions

In the short term, there is urgent need to provide food to vulnerable households. The national government, non-governmental organisations and private companies have done this through various initiatives. However, the scale of need in a city in which livelihoods of the majority are tied to the informal sector is greater than the scale of these interventions. The county government should proactively support informal sector traders by providing a safe

trading environment for themselves and their customers.

In the long term, Kisumu city needs a food security strategy that includes building resilience. It is laudable that Kisumu City has acknowledged 'improving the urban food system' as a key area of focus in the Local Physical and Land Use Development Plan (LPLUDP) currently being developed to guide the growth of the city for the next fifteen years. This should bring food and nutrition security to the core of urban planning.

Over-reliance on food imports from other regions of Kenya and neighbouring countries leaves Kisumu city vulnerable to food insecurity should there be any

disruption in the supply chain. This was witnessed during the 2007/ 2008 post election violence, the disputed 2017 elections and the current COVID19 pandemic. Part of the strategy should be to link production sources and consumption; and provide urban infrastructure and services that support informal food retailers to comply with food safety and hygiene regulations. The County government should prioritise provision of fresh produce markets with adequate food preservation facilities and integrate food retail sites and transport nodes. These measures will not only improve physical access to food but also create job opportunities in the food retail sector further enhancing food and nutrition security.

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