



AfriFOODlinks FOODChronicles

Kisumu



AfriFOODChronicles

Welcome to a new edition of the AfriFOODChronicles!

In this edition, we travel to Kisumu, a fast-growing lakeside city and an important ingredient in Kenya's regional trade, transport and food distribution system.

In this issue we will explore:

- How history has shaped Kisumu's food system
- Kisumu's food cultures
- Governance and power in Kisumu's food system
- Markets, Livelihoods and Informality
- Food security, food access and food environments in Kisumu

By understanding Kisumu's food system, we are able to see how history, urban growth, inequality and governance continue to shape everyday food access in the city.

We hope you enjoy your journey with us,
AfriFOODChronicles Editorial Team

Welcome to Kisumu

Feeding Kisumu: Food, Power and a City in Transition



Kisumu sits on the shores of Lake Victoria in the west of Kenya. It is a fast growing city, and a key element of the region's trade, transport and food distribution networks.

Similarly to many other secondary cities, Kisumu faces specific pressures relating to rising food prices, youth unemployment, climate related events and inequality.

By understanding Kisumu's history, we can see how food has shaped the city through power, governance, and contestation.



A Brief History of Kisumu

Kisumu's history is directly linked to water. The city began as a fishing and trading settlement for Luo communities who were living along the shores of Lake Victoria. The lake was central to the growth of Kisumu through providing fish, fertile land, and transport routes.

During British colonial rule in the early 20th century, Kisumu was transformed into a railway terminus and port town. The Ugandan Railway connected Kisumu to neighbouring cities of Nairobi and Mombasa. This continued Kisumu's key role as a hub for trade and administration. Under colonial rule, Kisumu became spatially segregated through colonial planning practices. The city was divided into separate residential areas for European, Asian and African residents. Not only were races segregated, but infrastructure investment was concentrated in specific zones of the city (particularly European only areas).

Following Kenya's independence in 1963, Kisumu's growth continued but the segregation imposed by British colonial rule resulted in unequal development. As more people began to seek work in the city, informal settlements began to expand, while infrastructure, housing and other services struggled to keep up. This pattern is present in the city today.

Although Kisumu remains a key regional centre, spatial inequality and segregation reflect colonial planning practices and decades of unequal investment



Food Cultures of Kisumu



As we've learnt, **food in Kisumu is closely tied to Lake Victoria**. Fish, particularly tilapia and omena, is a staple protein. Everyday staples in Kisumu include ugali (maize meal), sukuma wiki (leafy greens), beans, and vegetables.

The markets in Kisumu reflect the city's strong rural-urban connections. Much of the food in Kisumu is produced by smallholder farmers in the surrounding counties and transported into the city on a daily basis. As with many cities, women play a central role in both the production and trade of food, especially in fresh produce markets and cooked street food.

Despite the strong reliance on leafy greens, vegetables and maize, urbanisation has shifted diets.

Packaged snacks, processed and refined foods have become more common in the city, most notably among younger residents. This trend relates to the growth of the city, and the inability of infrastructure and services to keep up with demand, resulting in many residents needing to rely on fast, convenient sources of food.

Power in Kisumu's food system is considered to be uneven



Wholesalers, large traders and importers have significantly more influence over supply and pricing than informal and small-scale traders. This power imbalance becomes clear in the fractured governance processes in the food system, particularly in market spaces.

Governance and Power

In Kisumu, food governance occurs across multiple levels. At a national level, government ministries set policies on trade, agriculture, food safety and price controls. The Kisumu County Government manages markets, public health inspections, urban planning and local trade permits.

This multi-scaler approach can result in gaps in the governance process. For example, national policies may not fully reflect the county (local) context and realities. Persistent everyday governance challenges include market infrastructure maintenance, waste management, drainage challenges and a lack of cold storage facilities.

Similarly to other African cities, the markets in Kisumu are governed through formal licensing systems, but many traders operate informally.

The role of informal vendors is essential not only to food access, but also food governance in Kisumu. For example, formal County supported market committee structures are not adequate to manage market areas, and informal traders have created their own committee and governance structure to manage the market appropriately. However, this work is not formally recognised, resulting in fractured systems of power and governance including inconsistent enforcement of regulations such as evictions by the state.



Markets, Livelihoods and Informality

In Kisumu, open-air markets are a central part of the city's food system. These markets are not only spaces of trade, but also act as spaces of employment, social connection, and collective organising. The markets are made up of a majority of female traders, who rely on daily sales to support their households.

Informal vendors operate within and on the peripheries of market spaces, as well as on roadsides and near transport hubs. Foods that are sold include fruit, vegetables, fish, grains and cooked food in affordable quantities. For many low-income households, these vendors are crucial to their everyday food needs.

Despite the vital role that markets play in the city's food system, the infrastructure in many markets is in need of repair, or is inadequate for the traders' needs. For example, during rainy seasons, markets are flooded due to poor or ageing drainage and sanitation infrastructure. There is also a lack of cold storage facilities at many markets, which affects traders' profits and food safety. Traders are often compelled to invest their own money into repairing their stalls and protecting their stock from weather damage. This results in further financial pressure for traders.

Markets in Kisumu act as both economic livelihood strategies, as well as safety nets, particularly for women and unemployed youth when formal jobs are scarce. However, greater investment is needed to maintain these food system assets for traders as well as the people who rely on their important work.

Food in Kisumu

Food Security Snapshot

Food security in Kisumu is shaped by unemployment, poverty, climate related shocks and stresses, and volatile global politics.

Many households in the city depend on informal work, often with unstable incomes.

Price shocks as a result of various local and global shocks and stresses, affect vital products such as maize, cooking oil and fuel. In these situations, households in Kisumu are forced to adjust quickly to continue to meet their food needs.

Common coping strategies in these scenarios include reducing portion sizes or skipping meals. These types of strategies pose potential long-term health ramifications as these shocks and stresses become more frequent and prolonged, increasing the level of food insecurity. Other strategies include switching to cheaper foods, or buying on credit, both of which have longer term financial and health consequences too. In some cases, households will rely on rural relatives for support, which highlights the continued importance of the rural-urban ties.

Climate change related events are adding increased pressure onto affordable food access. For instance, droughts in rural areas disrupt food supply and increase food costs.

Most urban residents in Kisumu are not able to grow their own food for various reasons, which means they are highly dependent on a well-functioning market system to meet their food needs. And yet, flooding during rainy seasons affects both informal settlements and market infrastructure.

Food Access



As we have already heard, most people in Kisumu access food through a variety of sources. These include markets, small kiosks, street traders and supermarkets. This mix of sources can improve the resilience of households to the various shocks and stresses mentioned above.

While the number of supermarkets in Kisumu is growing, these remain more accessible to middle-income households than low-income households. **Many low-income households rely on informal vendors and markets as the most affordable and flexible food sourcing options.** But, transport costs also play a role in accessibility and affordability of food. Households living far away from main markets may pay higher prices at smaller kiosks, or higher transport costs when travelling to markets. This reflects the ongoing spatial inequality in Kisumu, and its impact on affordable food access.

Food in Kisumu is often purchased daily and in small quantities. This is because income is often unpredictable and infrastructure for dry and cold storage is limited in many informal urban areas. Women frequently manage the household food purchasing and budgeting which makes them central actors in navigating the city's food environments.

Food Environments in Kisumu

Kisumu's food environments are diverse but remain unequal.

Fresh produce is widely available in markets, but the quality of this produce varies depending on the season, weather, transport and infrastructure conditions. In many flood prone areas, food storage is difficult and often results in food loss.

Processed and packaged foods are increasingly visible in supermarkets and small-kisoks. These are convenient options for many residents in Kisumu as they are easy to prepare and require little energy. While these foods may not be the most nutritious option, they do offer residents who are navigating a context of limited infrastructure and resources, an affordable meal.

Infrastructure challenges remain a key element impacting the urban food environment in Kisumu.

These challenges include a lack of suitable drainage, poor waste management, unreliable electricity supply, and a lack of cold storage facilities. Each of these factors plays a role in affecting food price, availability and safety. Improving these systems could strengthen the urban food environment of Kisumu.



Towards a more Equitable Food System



Building a more resilient food system in Kisumu requires investment in market infrastructure (flood protection, sanitation, cold storage) as well as a rebalancing of governance and power structures relating to food.

Supporting informal traders as opposed to penalising them, would help to protect livelihoods and improve food access.

Better coordination between national and county governments could strengthen food governance, as well as improve market conditions for traders and consumers. Policies that recognise the role of women traders and youth entrepreneurs as central actors in the food system would help improve livelihoods.

Climate adaptation strategies are essential for the resilience of Kisumu's food system. Protecting markets from flooding during rainy seasons and supporting small-scale climate resilient agricultural practices in surrounding rural areas could help stabilise food supply.

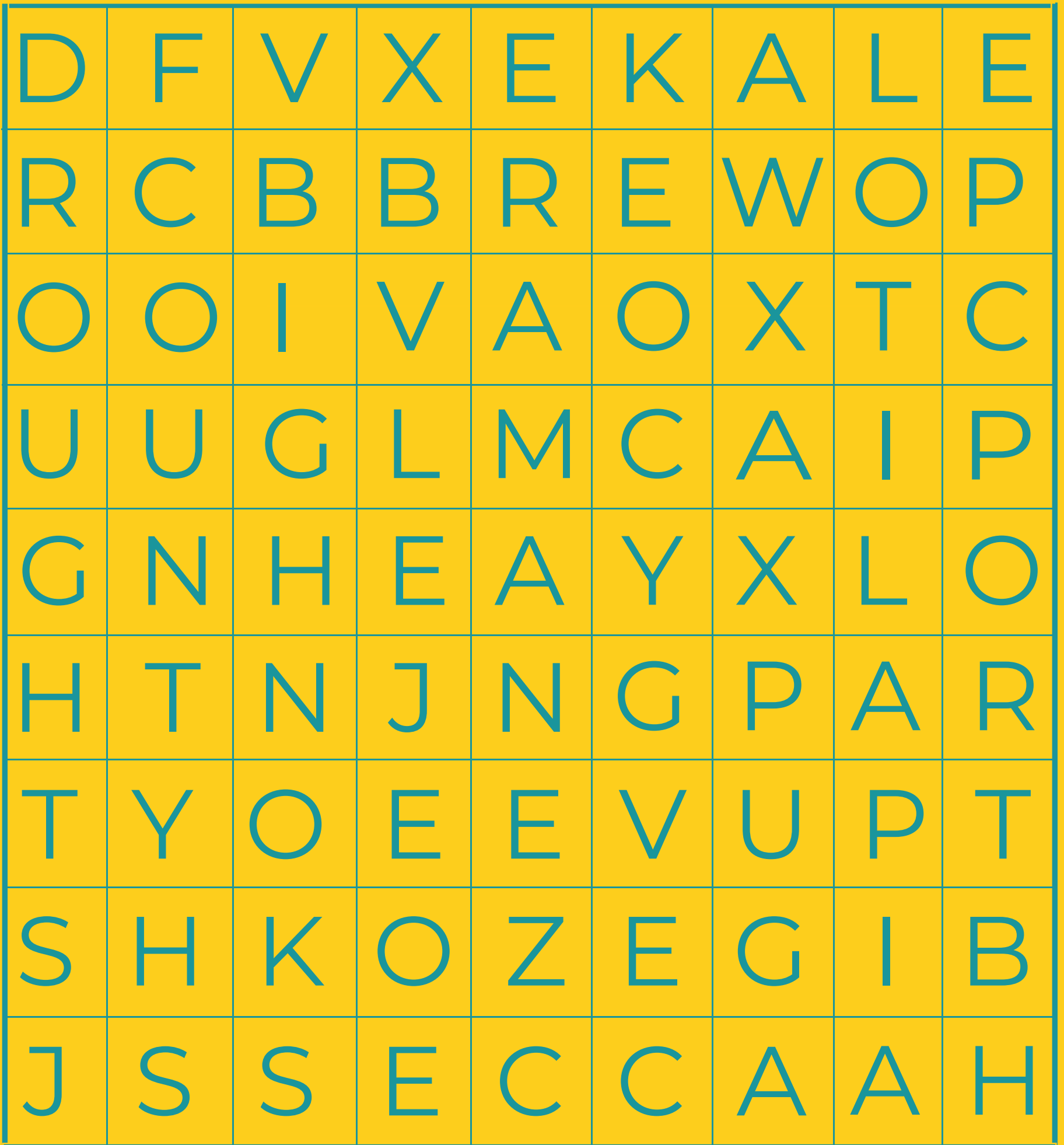
Conclusion

Kisumu's food system is shaped and continues to be shaped by history, informality, climate pressures and a legacy of spatial inequality.

Markets, women traders, and rural connections hold the urban food system together to provide vital affordable food access to the residents of Kisumu.

By strengthening infrastructure, governance and social protections, Kisumu can ensure that everyone in the city continues to have access to safe, affordable and nutritious food.

Word Search



Can you find all of the following words in the word search above?

1. Ugali
2. Tilapia
3. Kenya
4. Country
5. Lake
6. Women
7. Port
8. Access
9. Drought
10. Power

AfriFOODlinks
2026 by African Centre for Cities

All rights reserved.

Licensed to the European Union.

For more information, address:

afrifoodlinks@iclei.org and

gareth.haysom@uct.ac.za

March 2026

Author: **Alison Pulker**

Reviewer: **Anesu Makina**

Design: **Robyn Park-Ross**

Images: **Sam Reinders (for the Consuming Urban Poverty Project)**



AfriFOODlinks



**Funded by
the European Union**

All content adapted from the State of City Food System Report. For further information, references and data please see Opiyo, P., Otiende, F., Onditi, A., Achieng, L., Ominde, L., Oloko, M., Agong, S., Achieng, R. and Sande, J. (2024). *State of City Food System Report for Kisumu*, AfriFOODlinks project, Cape Town, South Africa.

This publication is produced by the African Centre for Cities under the framework of the AfriFOODlinks project. AfriFOODlinks is funded by the European Union (EU). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

