



AfriFOODlinks FOODChronicles

Mbale



AfriFOODChronicles

Welcome to a new edition of the AfriFOODChronicles!

In this edition, **we travel to Mbale, a city shaped by regional trade, fertile land and rapid urban expansion.**

In this issue we will explore:

- How Mbale's history has shaped the city,
- Who governs the urban food system,
- How residents access food in Mbale and,
- Why access to affordable nutritious food remains unequal.

Together, these stories show us a city full of resilience and potential, where food is central to the city's economy, culture and future.

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

Welcome to Mbale

A System Rooted in History



Mbale is one of Uganda's fastest growing secondary cities and an important regional hub.

The food system in Mbale is shaped by **agriculture, markets, trade and rapid urban growth.**

Food plays a vital role in Mbale's everyday life connecting people, livelihoods and culture in a city that is undergoing significant urban changes.

A Brief History of Mbale

Located at the foot of Mount Elgon, **Mbale has historically been connected to the surrounding region through trade and movement.** The name, Mbale, comes from the Lugisu word kamabale, meaning stones. The city's name reflects the rocky landscape surrounding Mbale.

Prior to colonial rule and the formalisation of the administrative area now known as Mbale, the region of Mbale was a place of farming, exchange and migration.

The fertile slopes of Mount Elgon provided ideal conditions for many farming communities, such as the Bagisu (Bamasaba). The Bagisu cultivated bananas, millet, sorghum and beans as well as other crops. Surplus produce was traded through local and regional networks for livestock, salt, pottery and cloth.

The region was well connected to wider trade routes across eastern Uganda into what is today Kenya. These connections made the Mbale region economically important before the beginning of colonial rule.

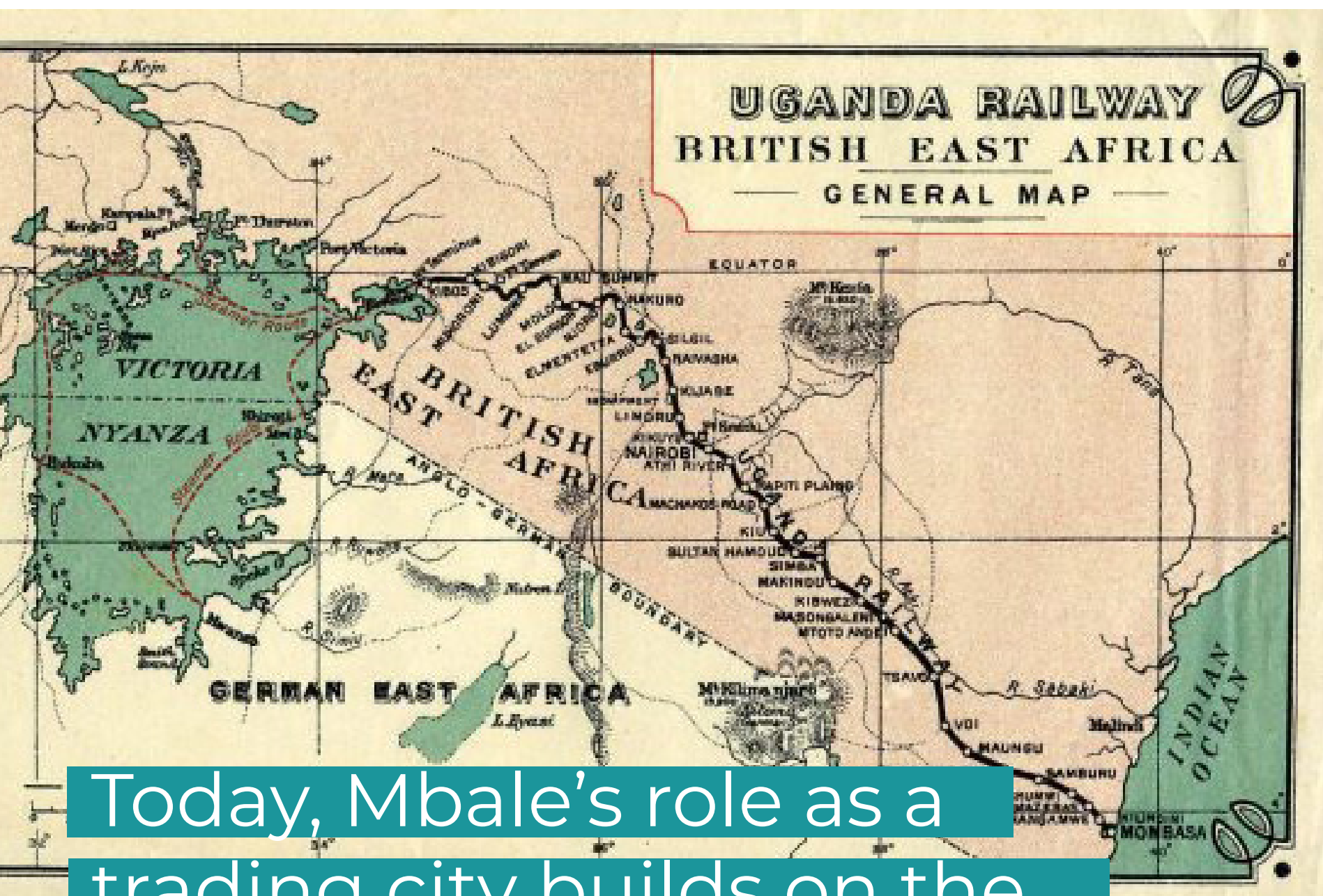


In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, colonial rule and railway expansion reshaped Mbale's historic trade routes. Under British colonial rule, Mbale became an administrative centre for eastern Uganda.

During this time, indentured labourers from India (another British colony at the time) were moved to Uganda as part of the British Empire's goal to solidify their control over the Kenya-Uganda Railway.

The indentured labourers were accompanied by merchants and shopkeepers to support the railway construction and the newly formed administration. This is one example of how colonial rule and infrastructure development shaped Mbale's colonial food system.

In 1962, Mbale was granted municipal status and **in 2020 Mbale was granted city status.**



Today, Mbale's role as a trading city builds on the pre-colonial histories of food production, mobility and regional exchange.

A City of Farms and Markets



Mbale is a unique city that includes significant amounts of rural and agricultural land within the city's boundaries. There is only a small portion of Mbale's total area that is urban, while other zones include farms, wetlands and peri-urban settlements.

The area surrounding the city acts as a food basket. Bananas, maize, beans, potatoes, greens, rice, cassava and other staples are supplied to the city by this fertile region. **Mbale is home to ideal farming conditions.** The fertile soils, warm climate and rivers make this level of food production possible. However, **climate change events, increasing crop pests and land degradation due to urban growth pose significant risks to Mbale's fertile farming conditions.**

Mbale's city and agricultural landscape, where urban and rural life remain closely connected, poses interesting questions about what is often accepted as the "norm" for a city's development. This challenges the notion of neatly bounded urban centres with rural edges, and shows the potential for peri-urban food systems. As a secondary city, **Mbale is a valuable example of how smaller but rapidly growing cities could be where the future of Africa's urban food systems lies.**

Food Governance

Food governance in Mbale happens across multiple levels. The National government sets many of the policies for agriculture, trade, health and infrastructure. At a local level, Mbale City Council manages markets, planning, engineering, public health and community services. Each of these local functions has an effect on the urban food system.

Despite playing a clear role in the urban food system, the city authority is constrained by financial decentralisation, meaning Mbale City Council has responsibilities without always having enough money or autonomy to implement those responsibilities.

This creates a very familiar challenge in urban food systems governance. **The local government is expected to manage various elements of the urban food system, while the ultimate decision making powers and budgets remain in a different sphere of government.**



Patchwork Power and Shared Systems

Mbale's food system relies on a wide range of actors and networks as opposed to one central authority.

Much of the city's food is supplied by smallholder farms, while traders and transporters distribute produce into local markets and neighbourhoods. Informal traders, kiosk owners and cooked food sellers provide access to affordable nutritious food close to where people live.

Other actors include NGOs, market associations, health facilities, government departments and schools. **All of these actors form a “patchwork” form of governance and power, where responsibilities are divided across multiple actors and agencies which are not always required to collaborate.** While the patchwork system **may be dynamic and adaptive, it is not always well coordinated with power being unevenly shared.**

Recently, there has been an emergence of a new multi-stakeholder platform, called the Good Food Parliament. This Parliament operates as a form of participatory governance model, and aims to create spaces where actors who have historically worked separately from one another, can meet to create a more cohesive network of food system actors. In addition to this, The Good Food Parliament model is a platform for the collective development of food related policies.

Food in Mbale

Food Security Snapshot

The food supply in Mbale is generally considered to be relatively reliable and affordable compared with many other cities. Fresh local foods are widely available, especially during harvest seasons due to the city's fertile surroundings.

While food is readily available, the access to this food is uneven, and not everyone is food secure.

Many poorer households struggle to access diverse and nutritious diets. This is partly due to the reliance on informal or seasonal employment, causing incomes to be unpredictable and unstable.

In addition to this, households in informal areas have limited access to refrigeration and storage, meaning residents are compelled to purchase smaller quantities more frequently. Outside of harvest seasons, when food has to be transported into the city, the cost of food rises, placing poorer households in both financial and nutritional stress.

In Mbale, the challenge to the food system is not whether there is enough food in the city, but rather whether this food is equally available and accessible to all residents to sustain a nutritious diet over time.

Food Environments

Most residents in Mbale access food through markets, vendors, kiosks and small shops.

The central market is one of the city's most important urban spaces. It offers more than just a place to purchase food, but also ties together urban functions such as infrastructure management, sanitation, waste management and public health.



The market functions as a commercial hub, livelihood centre, key distribution node and valuable social infrastructure for Mbale and the surrounding region. Produce from farms surrounding Mbale, arrives daily and is redistributed through traders, kiosks and vendors.

The market plays a vital role in affordability and access. Competition between traders can help to keep prices lower. Customers are also able to purchase food in smaller quantities depending on what they can afford that day, which provides many households with an essential form of purchasing flexibility.

The market also plays an important role in shaping food quality and safety. Some food items, such as seasonal fresh produce, move through the market quickly, leaving little risk of waste or rotting of food. However, overcrowding, insufficient waste management, and drainage problems can result in a decrease in food hygiene and increase in food spoilage.

The market is more than a place where food is sold, but also a space of convenience, socialising, and a link to the surrounding peri-urban area. The market is one area of the city where the everyday urban conditions under which people access and consume food is shaped.

Another element of Mbale's food environment is the way in which **the formal and informal economies operate side by side.** Traders play multiple roles from wholesale, to retail to distribution in order to survive in the competitive local food environment.

Recently, Mbale has seen an increase in new forms of food system innovation including delivery services, organised farmer groups, savings cooperatives and online food suppliers. These services show how both the formal and informal economy are adapting to demand, despite infrastructure and governance lagging behind.

Conclusion

Mbale is a city with strong foundations for a more just and resilient food system.

From fertile land, to active markets and growing civic partnerships, Mbale is providing an interesting example of an alternative urban food system for African cities.

Unlocking this potential requires improvements to infrastructure, a more empowered local authority, safer market areas, and support for the low income households who keep the city running and fed.

Target Word

U	P	R
I	E	N
R	B	A

Make as many words as you can! Each word must be 4 letters or longer, and contain the middle letter. There is one target word that uses all 9 letters.

Good luck!

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For more information, address:

afrifoodlinks@iclei.org and

gareth.haysom@uct.ac.za

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Author: **Alison Pulker**

Reviewer: **Anesu Makina**

Design: **Robyn Park-Ross**

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Uganda Railway 1903 by **A.C.**

Gomes & C. accessed via Old East

Africa Postcards, map on pg. 4

British East India in 1910

accessed via **Forum LR PRESSE,**

photograph on this page **Kayla**

Farma, all other photography by

ZIV photographer



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