Informal Markets

AfriFOODlinks
FOODChronicles

Comparative Series





AfriFOODChronicles

Welcome to the first edition of the AfriFOODChronicles Comparative Series!

This series explores the **similarities and differences across the AfriFOODLinks Hub Cities**, and how these shape their urban food systems and environments.

Across five editions, we will cover five themes and their role in shaping Africa's urban food systems:

informal food markets,
climate change,
gender,
shared colonial histories, and
urban food governance.

We invite you to join us as we explore what makes our cities' food systems unique, what they share, and, importantly, what we can learn from one another's experiences.

In this edition, we look at **the role of informal markets across the five cities**, exploring the social, economic and cultural role they play in shaping these cities, while also recognising the precarious conditions faced by those working in the informal economy.

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



Informal food markets are central to how people access food across Cape Town, Tunis, Kisumu, Ouagadougou and Mbale.

Feeding the city



Street vendors, open-air markets, neighbourhood shops and small-scale food producers provide affordable food, support livelihoods and sustain local food cultures.

For many residents, these markets make it possible to buy food in small quantities, in ways that reflect irregular incomes and limited household storage. For traders, particularly women and young people, they provide livelihoods where formal employment is scarce.

Yet the importance of informal markets is not always reflected in how cities plan, regulate and invest in their food systems. Traders work with inadequate waste management, drainage and cold storage, face flooding and severe weather, and navigate unclear regulations, inconsistent enforcement and police harassment. Their contribution to urban life is substantial, but the conditions under which they work remain insecure.



Informal markets are not peripheral to the city's food system. They are part of its everyday infrastructure.

Reframing the formal informal binary

The distinction between formal and informal food economies looks much less clear when we follow the food itself.

In Cape Town, informal fresh produce traders source much of their stock from the formal Cape Town Fresh Produce Market, as well as other small-scale farmers. Meat traders often buy stock daily because limited refrigeration restricts what they can store. Informal businesses depend on formal supply chains, but the infrastructure available to them shapes how they are able to operate.

In Kisumu, smallholder farmers from surrounding counties supply food to informal traders. Within market spaces, traders have established their own committees to manage trading activities where formal county-supported structures have proven themselves to be insufficient. These arrangements provide a practical form of market governance, even though they remain largely unrecognised by formal governance structures.





In Mbale, traders often combine wholesaling, retailing and distribution. Delivery services, savings cooperatives, organised farmer groups and online food suppliers show how businesses are adapting to changing demand, and a growing urban population. At the same time, informal traders may be obliged to pay VAT on purchases from formal businesses without being able to claim rebates.

In Tunis, the relationship takes a different form. Formal traders inside the Central Market rely on regulated supply chains, including the Bir El Kassaa wholesale market. Outside, informal vendors sell fresh produce, herbs and prepared foods at lower prices, serving residents who cannot afford supermarket prices or larger quantities. The two forms of trade coexist, but not on equal terms. Informal vendors face police harassment and insecure trading locations, while some operate through arrangements described as “municipal tolerance”. While formal traders inside the market often feel undercut by the informal traders as they are able to be more flexible with their pricing.

Across the hub cities, **formal and informal food economies overlap through supply chains, distribution, retail and governance. Both of these economies operate within the same urban food system, but under different conditions of recognition, regulation, protection and influence.**

Who can trade, and on what terms?

The relationship between the formal and informal economy raises a question about how cities understand and govern their food economies.

Informal traders help to make food more accessible for urban residents, create employment and in some cases organise their own trading environments. Yet their access to infrastructure, secure trading spaces and institutional recognition remains limited.

Where formal arrangements do not meet everyday needs, such as in Kisumu, traders develop their own systems. These can be effective and locally grounded, but they do not necessarily receive the support or legitimacy given to official structures.

This results in a **contradiction where cities depend on informal food economies to keep residents, particularly low income households, fed while often treating informality as something to be controlled, relocated or removed.**

Recognising informal markets therefore requires acknowledging their existence as well as asking whose activities are supported by urban planning, whose forms of organisation count as governance, and whose needs shape decisions about market infrastructure and public space.





Beyond Food: Markets as Living Archives

Markets provide more than food and livelihoods to many urban residents. They also **sustain and preserve the food cultures and histories** of the cities they serve.

In Tunis, vendors sell Amazigh staples, foraged herbs, preserved foods and traditional pastries.

In Kisumu, markets connect residents to foods associated with Lake Victoria and local food traditions, including tilapia, omena, ugali and sukuma wiki. In Ouagadougou, millet and sorghum remain important staples in the city.

In Cape Town, informal food environments sustain dishes shaped by Indigenous and Cape Malay histories, including koesisters, bobotie and roti as well as isiXhosa traditions such as smileys and amagwinya.

These foods carry knowledge about ingredients, preparation, seasonality and place. Markets connect producers, traders and consumers, **keeping food traditions present in everyday urban life.**

When markets are treated only as sites of economic activity or problems of regulation, these cultural roles risk being overlooked, and food itself becomes reduced to a commodity.











Planning for the markets we already have



The experiences of Cape Town, Tunis, Kisumu, Ouagadougou and Mbale show that informal food markets are diverse, adaptive and deeply embedded in urban life. They support food access and livelihoods, connect formal and informal supply chains, create their own grounded governance arrangements and sustain local food cultures and heritage.

Yet the people who perform these roles continue to face inadequate infrastructure, insecure trading conditions and limited recognition.

The question for us as people who are invested in the future of Africa's urban food system is, how can urban planning and food governance respond to the interconnected food systems that already exist in our cities?

Investing in appropriate infrastructure, supporting trader-led governance and developing more inclusive regulatory approaches would help strengthen the contribution these markets make to sustaining accessible, resilient and equitable African urban food systems.



There is a clear **need to recognise how much our cities rely on informal food markets**, rather than to continue to try to make the informal markets adapt to our cities.

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For further information, references and data please see

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- **Working Paper:** Pulker, A. (forthcoming). Comparative Links from AfriFOODChronicles: Colonial Histories, Governance, Informality, Climate Change and Gender.

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