



Daily market in the town of Kpalimé in Togo.

Photo: Naftali Hilger/Laif

# BETTER FOOD SYSTEMS FOR BETTER RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES

Rapid global population growth is blurring the boundary between urban and rural. In reality, the traditional distribution of roles in agricultural and food production has given way to new structures. Regional planning ought to consider changed livelihoods in order to provide an adequate framework for development and to integrate food systems. A call for transformative change.

By Makiko Taguchi and Guido Santini

In 2007, the world population officially tipped over to be more urban, with the current estimate being 55 per cent living in urban areas. This development is certainly one of the reasons for much of investments in recent decades having had more focus on “urban development”, often leaving the rural population behind. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has focused its work on “rural development” since its foundation in 1945, concentrating on agricultural development which is considered mostly a rural activity, balancing this global trend towards the urban. But the fact of the matter is that agriculture was precisely the reason urbanisation began thousands of years ago, allowing people to settle in one location rather than having to move around to find food. However, when industrial revolution set in, it changed the rural-urban dynamics. Agricultural production became farther away from where people lived, and thus the image of agriculture being rural evolved.

Currently, urban development typically does not take issues of food or agriculture into consideration. The reason behind this is unknown. Perhaps it is that food is simply taken for granted, as a lot of us do. At any rate, schools teaching urban planning do not have elements of food and agriculture in their curriculum. This lack of food systems in urban planning – or the disconnect between rural and urban – has resulted in various forms of shortfalls: food deserts in inner cities resulting in malnutrition for the urban poor, vulnerability to flash flooding and extreme weather events, ever longer food chains, transportation and logistics challenges, more and more food losses and waste, loss of arable land – the list goes on and on.

## REALITY OF PEOPLE'S LIVELIHOODS NOT TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

Most development theory and practice is implicitly based on the dichotomy between 'rural' and 'urban' areas, populations and activities.

This has been reflected in urban and rural development, with urban planning usually concentrating on urban nodes and infrastructure such as housing and transportation with little or no attention given to food and agriculture, while rural development has had a tendency to ignore urban centres and define rural areas as consisting only of villages and their agricultural land. The classification that divides people into either 'rural' or 'urban' is often used when policies are being developed but is in fact misleading and unhelpful. Links exist between rural and urban locations in the same way that links exist between people and their activities. This, however, does not reflect the reality of households' livelihoods, which often include both rural and urban elements.

## RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES ARE MANIFOLD

Rural and urban areas exist across a broad “rural-urban continuum”, ranging from megacities and large regional centres to small townships and the rural hinterland. Besides the fact that rural areas were always dependent on cities, that interdependence has become more profound nowadays, also facilitated by greater access to traditional and virtual communications. The nature of these interactions has become more intense, both across space and across sectors – agriculture, industry and services – with important implications for food systems. The urbanisation of rural regions is a central feature of rural transformation. It allows rural households to diversify their sources of employment and income while living and working across a rural-urban continuum. These links are not only key components of livelihoods and of local economies, they are also 'engines' that drive economic, social and cultural transformations.

Rural-urban linkages have been defined broadly as the reciprocal flows of people, goods, services in general, money and environmental services, with many of these linkages

related directly or indirectly to food systems. They can be represented by linkages between sectors (e.g. between agriculture and manufacturing). In addition, rural-urban interactions can include “rural” activities taking place in urban centres (such as urban agriculture) and activities often classified as urban (such as manufacturing and services) taking place in rural settlements. Significant changes happen within food systems that impact rural-urban linkages such as the decline of traditional markets, globalisation of diets and the increasing availability of highly processed food. Smallholder producers and processors, who often rely on nearby urban areas for markets, are increasingly competing with food produced from distant sources, often selling for lower prices. Food systems link rural and urban communities in a region within a country, across regions, and sometimes between continents. Cities and urban food systems play an important role in shaping their surrounding – and more distant – rural areas as far as land use, food production, environmental management, transport and distribution, marketing, consumption and waste generation is concerned.

## BRIDGING THE GAP IN FOOD SYSTEMS

In recent years, this problematic gap is slowly being recognised by urban planners, national and local policy-makers, the development community and consumers. One important turning point was the inclusion of Target 11.A under Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, see Box).

**SDG 11:** make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

**Target 11.a:** support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning

Following this, the third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (i.e. Habitat III, 2016) adopted the New Urban Agenda (NUA), which further clarifies the importance of rural-urban linkages and the role of food security, nutrition, and food systems for sustainable urban development. One of the objectives of Habitat III was to dive deeper into the “how” to implement the SDGs, in this case with focus on SDG 11, taking into account the inter-connectedness of Goal 11 with other goals. This outcome is leading UN agencies such as FAO, the World Food Programme, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN Habitat) to work closer together in an effort to bridge this gap. One example of that is the work being led by UN Habitat on the guiding principles on rural-urban linkages currently in progress.



Loading coconut shells to be transported to urban areas in Tamil Nadu, India.

Photo: Jörg Böhling

## SECONDARY CITIES PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE

When people hear the word “urban”, it may evoke an image of a large city or a metropolitan area. However, many urban areas in the world are secondary cities, in particular smaller towns and cities. There is no universally agreed definition for the term “secondary city”, although most of the literature agrees that they form part of the order or systems of cities in a country or a global system of cities. Secondary cities play a very important functional role, depending on whether they are considered as part of a country- or global-level system of cities. Secondary cities are thus not primary cities, nor are they likely to be small cities with populations of less than 100,000, but they are everything in between.

Some towns are experiencing decline in population, while others are going through a rapid growth. These towns and cities that are growing are where opportunities lie to include food systems into their urban development. Megacities and large metropolitan areas certainly have their own challenges in terms of food security and food systems, but they tend to attract investments and political attention (most are capital cities) compared to secondary cities. So what we, working in development, need to focus on is the small or secondary

cities where there may still be more “room” for improvement and where there is a need for investments and technical support. Many of these secondary urban areas are agricultural hubs, where primary production or raw materials may be consolidated and processed. Improving connectivity of these hubs with larger cities or markets can create job opportunities, and improving the food system within them can create a more sustainable and resilient environment for their residents.

In this respect, smaller, intermediate settlements and rural areas can constitute systems of “functional territories” when better integrated, and thus they support both sustainable urbanisation and sustainable food systems. The interaction of agricultural producers, input, processing and other farm services is more proximate in these combined rural and urban spaces. More remote rural areas and larger cities both depend on the functioning of the intermediate cities and rural areas.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Globally, sub-national and local governments are increasingly interested in creating stronger linkages with their surrounding areas, developing territorial food systems or incorporating

food systems into urban planning. One of the examples of this growing interest can be seen in the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which was initiated by the mayor of Milan, in Italy, on the occasion of the Milan Expo in 2015. This group of cities, which now counts 179 municipalities in the world, are committed to improve their food system at city and regional level. Some of these cities are taking innovative approaches, and the Pact facilitates the exchange of experiences across its members. The FAO has been supporting this effort through providing technical support, establishing a common indicator framework so that the cities can keep track of its progress. What has become very clear in this process is that situations in each of these cities are vastly different, and capacities varied. While this does not indicate

that experiences from one city to another or a region to another cannot happen, it means that careful contextualisation is required when approaches, methods, or technologies are being introduced to a new city or region.

It has also highlighted the fact that while many municipalities are ultimately responsible for the food security of their citizens through decentralisation or devolution of power, capacity building in how a city deals with that has not been done, leaving them with little or no capacity to plan or implement appropriate policy at local level. For some cities, this is becoming a pressing issue as they face an increasing number of extreme weather events and are having to deal with food insecurity situations. Considering the fact that 40 per cent of the world population live within a distance of 100 km from the coast, extreme weather events such as hurricanes, typhoons, tsunamis, and other natural disasters caused by climate change in general are of major concern for coastal cities.

The Pact’s framework for action as well as the New Urban Agenda state the importance of balancing urban and rural interests for sustainable development. The challenge for rural areas is that their voices are inevitably weaker than those of the cities with larger populations. To better balance this dynamics, more advo-

cacy and awareness is necessary on the ecosystem services that rural – agricultural and forest land – can provide to urban dwellers. Cleaner water and air can be provided by strategically placed and managed agricultural land in rural hinterlands. As food is taken for granted, other natural resources such as water and air are also taken for granted by urban dwellers. Policies protecting watersheds and green corridors must be supported by both urban and rural residents, fully acknowledging the important role rural hinterlands have for a healthy city to thrive. This goes back to the importance of food systems integration into urban planning, as unplanned or poorly planned urban sprawl can result in accelerated water scarcity and other negative impacts such as increased potential for flooding and landslides.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Empowering local governments and stakeholders to improve their food system and ensure that food is considered in urban planning is a must. Promoting a territorial, city region perspective recognises the territory as a geographical space that reconnects urban and rural areas including the environmental, social, political, cultural and economic assets, and processes interacting within it, and a space of governance for human activities and where future projects are conceived and implemented. The territory is governed and influenced by a community of actors dealing with common challenges by defining appropriated actions and policies. The scale of territorial or city region is the most suitable one to understand and improve food systems in an efficient way and make them more sustainable. This should include maximisation of local production potential and creating shorter food chains for the efficiency and securing delivery of nutritious foods by better linking peri-urban and surrounding rural producers with the urban markets, but it obviously cannot be completely detached from the global economy. What is required then is to have streamlined and coherent policies across local, national and global levels to create an enabling environment for the development of sustainable food systems. Investments are necessary to build capacity at all levels of government, and to implement the

## WHAT IS RURAL, WHAT IS URBAN? AND WHAT ARE THE TRENDS?

There is no universal definition of what is urban, and the global data is based on each country defining what it considers urban, and the population within it. The definition can vary from a cluster of five households or more to an administrative boundary defined by population density and built-up area. In addition, the definition of urban within a country can change over time. Asia and Africa are the two regions currently experiencing the fastest growth of urban areas. Combined, they will account for 86 per cent of the global urban growth in the coming four decades. In Africa, the pull towards the capital city for opportunities is still strong, but some countries are realising the importance of secondary cities and starting to invest in them. In Asia, a phenomenon described as *Desakota* can be observed, where growing cities absorb other smaller towns and rural areas surrounding it and the boundaries between rural and urban literally become blurred.

Latin America is the most urbanised region, with 80 per cent of its population living in urban areas. Development of secondary cities is also occurring in this region at a very high pace, with some cities progressively integrating food systems into their planning.

changes they need in their food systems. Investments for urban development may in general be directed towards infrastructure such as transportation, waste management, or energy, but even so, taking food into consideration for all of these sectors can ultimately benefit the city. Multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral dialogue is the first step towards a successful system approach.

So what exactly does this mean for urban development? It is actually about better connecting the rural elements, whether it is food, ecosystem services, natural resources, or labour, with elements that may be considered urban – such as financial services, information, and energy – to work together towards a more sustainable development. With the technologies we already have in transportation or ICT,

physical or virtual distance between rural and urban really does not exist, we just have to change our mind sets for the environment we already live in, and accept the fact that we cannot live without one or the other.

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A parallel world between modernisation and tradition in Zinder, Niger.

Photo: Jörg Böhling