

Strengthening food markets across the rural-urban continuum

The importance of maintaining functioning food markets in the face of global food supply chain vulnerability and disruption has brought new attention to markets that support local and territorial food systems. Drawing on lessons from Covid-19 impacts on rural and urban regions and their populations, our author presents proposals for these markets – formal and informal alike – to cope with future shocks.

By Thomas Forster

The world has been living through the Coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) since early 2020 with differing impacts and responses between rural and urban areas. The pandemic began in cities and spread to rural areas over the course of 2020, and continues to evolve as new variants keep spreading. Local and national governments, the private sector, civil society, donors and the UN system pivoted in 2020 to analyse impacts of Covid-19 and, based on new evidence, apply interventions to address the most Covid-vulnerable. The capacity to understand and respond to protect populations in poorer countries has been uneven and far more challenging in rural areas, especially in the Global South.

Rural and urban Covid response through a food systems' lens

The early surges of the Covid-19 virus, with higher levels of severe illness and death, led cities across the world to close all venues in which people were crowded together, including schools, restaurants, food canteens and institutional feeding programmes of all kinds. Food markets and their workers were deemed essential in most countries, but many of them shut down or had their operations dramatically curtailed as food supply chains collapsed. Emergency lockdowns or stay-at-home orders required the isolation of entire urban populations in their homes and social distancing when in public. Such were the primary emergency measures across Europe and North America that then were adopted in many countries, including the least developed poorer ones.

These measures were much harder to apply and enforce in the urban areas of low-income countries, especially in the crowded conditions of urban slums that are home to one billion globally. Lockdowns and social distancing in many cities in Africa, South Asia and Latin America were simply not possible. In addition, one critical source of food for settlements from villages to towns and cities is informal street vendors and public food markets, often found parallel to more formal farmers and whole-

sale markets. These markets were essential for many urban dwellers.

Rural impacts of the pandemic varied from being more extreme than urban impacts to being more diffuse, depending on degrees of isolation from urban areas, with variable impacts on different ethnic groups. For example, the impacts were much more severe for the poor and for Indigenous Peoples in many parts of the world. Much of the focus in public media has been on health disparities of rural access to testing and later, to vaccines. Through the lens of the food system, the lockdowns of urban areas had a huge impact on rural areas. Many rural producers lost market access either because transport was restricted or the markets they relied on were closed for public health reasons.

For the livelihoods of two very large groups of food producers and food workers in rural areas, the impacts were especially severe. A majority of farmers in many low-income countries are women and Indigenous Peoples who grow and often sell food in the informal markets of many cities in Africa and Latin America. To them, urban lockdowns and social distancing, coupled with market shutdowns, are continuing to exacerbate challenges that preceded the pandemic but were made far worse by Covid-19.

Migration flows putting pressure on rural economies

The second large group is farm, food and other workers who migrate to work for their livelihoods. In many regions, international and domestic migrant workers were unable to travel for seasonal farm work. Migration from rural to urban areas for not

only food but all forms of work in urban areas saw a massive reversal from urban back to rural areas of origin for millions of workers. The magnitude of the reverse flows to rural areas in 2020 had significant impacts on rural economies and placed great stress on public services and social protection systems where they existed. These reversals may or may not be fully turned around to flow from rural to urban, putting pressure on rural economies and service provision for years to come.

At the height of the first pandemic surge in 2020, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that 94 per cent of the world's workers resided in countries with some form of closure measure.

In many low-income countries a majority of farmers are women and Indigenous People who often sell food in the informal markets.

Photo: Jörg Böhling



ILO reported that there were 164 million migrant workers world-wide. Beyond the immediate severe needs in rural areas for families that suffered from loss of livelihoods and markets, the impacts and needs of rural communities would be felt for many years.

Creating new alliances between farmers and market actors

Local and national governments, international organisations, civil society and the private sector turned from the emergency phases of response to Covid-19 to medium- and longer-term efforts to protect health and livelihoods from this and other shocks. Out of the many lessons from the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, one area of renewed focus has been on the future of food markets that are at the centre of urban-rural linkages as critical components of sustainable and resilient food systems. Here, territorial market systems that bring urban communities closer to rural communities are finding renewed interest in connection with building more sustainable and resilient food supply chains. A territorial market system that has different types of functional markets addresses rural economic development through access to markets for smallholders, and urban food security through access to healthy foods that are important products of sustainable agro-ecosystems. Here it is important to bear in mind that the markets that many smaller and medium scale farmers and food businesses rely on include informal street markets and vendors, farmers markets, and public wholesale and retail markets. What the pandemic has

Towards a systemic approach

In April 2022, a technical consultation was organised on market systems at the centre of urban-rural linkages. This virtual event hosted by UN-Habitat brought together networks of wholesale and farmers markets, NGOs working in poorer countries to support their informal and farmers' markets, global networks of cities and regions, as well as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UN-Habitat. Based on this consultation, a broader networking event on the same topic was organised for the 11th World Urban Forum in Katowice, Poland, in June.

Taking examples from Bangladesh, Vietnam, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa and Portugal, countries and cities have presented promising approaches. In Johannesburg, for instance, small-scale farmers participate in the formal wholesale market. The collaboration between market actors supports small farm supply for the local food bank and the formation of farmers' cooperatives to use the market facility for packing and distribution. In Cape Town, where 40 per cent of the city's produce flows through the wholesale market, efforts are underway to improve cold storage, transport, retail hubs and services for both farmers and buyers. These measures help move more volumes of product from smallholders and address some of the barriers to smaller producers. In Portugal, the wholesale market system has been modernised in close coordination with farmers' groups and with municipal governments. In order to support farmers' presence, specific areas for local farmers are maintained, and technical assistance is provided in addition to logistical support linking farmers, wholesalers and retailers.

There was broad consensus at these events that the markets which directly bring rural and urban communities together through shorter supply chains in urban and territorial food systems need far more support from governments, from donors, and from academic researchers. As part of comprehensive food systems approaches, markets need to be better understood as "market systems" linking informal and formal retail markets, farmers' markets and wholesale markets.

shown, among other things, is that when markets are disrupted or collapse, opportunities do arise to form new alliances between farmers and market actors to create new or alternative distribution channels and "last mile" food delivery. Informal market vendors, farmers' market managers and wholesale market operators have demonstrated that rapid adaptive mea-

asures can be taken to work around disrupted market channels. This market innovation and adaptation was not limited to Europe or North America, but occurred in all regions (also see Box).

What came through the many studies, dialogues and exchanges of pandemic food prac-

Passengers at Andohatapenaka Bus Station in Antananarivo, Madagascar. They are leaving the capital to return to their home town due to lack of livelihood because of a prolonged lockdown.

Photo: World Bank / Henitsoa Rafalia





Wholesale markets should also provide access for small farmers.

Photo: FAO/ Maxx Valencia

tices during the early surges and then during the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit is that certain pre-existing conditions greatly helped processes which unfolded with the results that farmers' livelihoods were preserved and urban consumers, especially those most at risk for infection, could receive adequate and nutritious foods directly delivered. Among general conditions for an integrated rural-urban approach are the following:

- In countries and subnational regions where territorial approaches to development have linked urban and rural needs and priorities, there are relationships at institutional and governmental levels that are pre-existing and can facilitate rapid response to crisis or shocks.
- Cities and local governments are on the front lines of crisis response and can rapidly redirect policies and programmes where mechanisms for interagency or cross-jurisdiction collaboration exist across the rural-urban continuum.

Inclusive and resilient market systems need fresh thinking

Covid-19 and conflict-induced price volatility have reinforced the importance of addressing both informal and formal markets across the urban-rural continuum and their interaction to promote synergy, fairness and inclusion. Market systems are where urban and rural communities intersect on a daily basis, exchanging goods, services, information, and social and monetary capital, and these linkages are essential for resilience and sustainability for cities and territories. A new narrative linking rural and urban components and actors in a holistic approach to market systems can help to as-

sess markets and provide evidence for policy to address challenges and improve fresh food markets for affordable and equitable access to healthy diets for all.

Public sector support for market infrastructure needs to be adapted to the new fragility of supply chains and support a more complex web of markets for resilience in food systems. Processes of dialogue and policy formation for all markets critical to feeding human settlements need investment and capacity development. Public and private sector investment in markets and market actors should be balanced between support for larger formal wholesale and retail markets and support for informal and farmers markets. Small and intermediary cities are vital to market systems as hubs for aggregation of small and medium size farms and food enterprises to supply larger markets and cities. Informal markets are a major source of food supply for the urban and rural poor, and their importance has been especially evident during the pandemic. Small, medium and large farmers, traders and other intermediaries need fair and transparent economic conditions and governance frameworks for functional and mutually prosperous interaction.

Market actors, together with local and national government agencies and support from non-governmental actors, should plan for coming shocks and challenges by collaborating to:

- improve technical capacity and invest in roles of different market actors, such as farmers, small traders, direct market retail, market associations and organisations, and small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs). Even actions of some larger businesses and local authorities are necessary for unlocking the potential of territorial food markets;

- strengthen food governance at the centre of work on market and food systems, including across urban and rural jurisdictions and levels of governance (local, regional, national, and international);
- support new coalitions of countries and international organisations emerging from mobilisation around the UN Food Systems Summit related to market systems, including the World Farmers Markets Coalition, the Urban Food Systems Coalition and a Coalition for Territorial Food System Governance;
- support new alliances between actors who have been invisible to international organisations or were perceived to be in competition rather than complementary parts of a holistic market ecosystem;
- improve public policies and programmes for food system sustainability and resilience in the long term.

In conclusion, and to realise the five goals above, here are five concrete steps that actors can all take to implement them and strengthen both informal and formal markets across the urban rural continuum:

- Co-create crosscutting principles for inclusive and resilient market systems (with market actors, international partners, local and national government representatives, non-governmental, civil society and private sector actors).
- Assess and map market systems based on shared principles and practices through participatory processes across the urban-rural continuum.
- Develop capacity in government and market actors to manage market system improvement.
- Deliver conclusions for policy and programmes to local and national governments and partners.
- Design and implement finance measures through appropriate governance mechanisms.

Thomas Forster has been the lead consultant for joint publications on urban-rural linkages and sustainable territorial development and city region food systems with FAO, UN-Habitat, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), among others. He teaches multilevel policy and governance at New School University in New York/ USA.

Contact: thomasforster2@gmail.com

More information: www.rural21.com