Urban growth and food security

In the 1960s, two inhabitants in ten in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia lived in cities, whereas it is estimated that close on 60 percent of the population will be living in urban areas by the year 2025, and many African and Asian cities will double their population in 20 years. The situation is different in Latin America where the problem is posed less in terms of rapid growth of urban centres but more in terms of feeding a population 85 per cent of which will be urban by the year 2025. Such urban population is characterised by high poverty levels, which are evident in the large shantytowns which surround most of the large cities in this region. In the countries in transition of Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, urbanisation levels will be reaching 75-80 per cent in 2025 despite urban growth rates often below 1 per cent. The challenge in these countries is represented by the need to organise food production, processing and marketing facilities so as to satisfy an urban demand characterised by growing poverty levels in terms of purchasing power of disposable incomes. High levels of urbanisation, population growth and very rapid expansion of urban areas represent a new dimension for development and food security policies and programmes in many developing countries and countries in transition (DTCs).

In response to growing food needs, these countries have increased their imports. Economic stabilisation policies, and in many cases currency devaluation, are now forcing them to restrict imports and resort increasingly to domestic production, which can be stimulated by the recapture of domestic markets.

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Feeding tomorrow’s cities

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Jacques Diouf, Director-General of FAO
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Suppling the cities is also a major challenge as by the year 2010 it is estimated that the population of the world’s cities will have almost doubled. This unprecedented expansion calls for massive investments in food distribution, storage and marketing facilities. It requires also special social programmes to allow the urban poor to have access to food directly.
supply the inhabitants of cities with increasing amounts of food coming from ever more distant production zones. The expansion of cities and shantytowns, the growth in urban traffic, and poorly managed and increasingly antiquated marketing infrastructure make food distribution within urban areas difficult, and therefore costly.

In many DTCs cities the percentage and number of marginalized people continue to grow, while the dynamics of cities and city life is modifying consumers’ eating habits and purchasing patterns. Rising food prices are coming up against a fall in purchasing power in DTCs. Forecasts indicate a very limited rise in urban inhabitants’ incomes, which means that the food security of the majority of urban consumers will steadily decline. One of the main challenges of forthcoming decades will be to achieve an efficient distribution of nutritional and inexpensive foodstuffs to the poorest sectors of urban populations.

High and growing levels of urban food demand also have important repercussions on peri-urban and rural areas, upon which cities depend. In fact, from harvesting until the moment the produce reaches the urban consumers’ table, a whole series of interventions (handling, processing, packaging, transport, storing, marketing, etc.) adds to the price at each stage, and to the amount it costs consumers to feed themselves. All these factors will increase the pressure on existing FSDSs.

The enhancement of the broad range of rural-urban linkages would greatly support development initiatives under the FAO’s Special Programme for Food Security.

Levels of urbanisation (2000-2025)

Source: UN (1994)

Growth of cities in Western Africa: (1990 - 2020)

Source: OCDE - Club du Sahel, 1997
Since direct action by State institutions has proved ineffective, there is now an urgent need to make efficient, well-managed services and infrastructure available for use by the private food trade. Traders must be provided with an adequate legislative and regulatory framework, investment incentives and all the necessary support to satisfy a growing and constantly changing urban food demand as economically as possible.

Dynamic and efficient food supply and distribution systems are vital if the food security of urban consumers, especially the most needy, is to be improved. This is because they facilitate access to the desired foods and required services at reasonable prices and also help job creation, and therefore incomes, thus leading to an increase in consumers' purchasing power. Many small street vendors and food stalls can make a living for themselves and their families by processing or selling foodstuffs. If the quality of their products can be assured, their activities will provide adequate and inexpensive nourishment for many urban inhabitants.

A greater integration of food producers with the market will lead to higher national production through remunerative producer prices while allowing more affordable consumer prices. The challenges facing decision makers in DTCs in the years to come include those of meeting the increased food demands posed by high levels of urbanisation and by the rapid growth of cities, reducing economic dependence on imports while boosting food security, and conveying food to consumers at the lowest possible cost, while creating jobs in the food distribution sector. The relations between urban dynamics and FSDSs present a variety of aspects of interest in a number of research fields. These can be the subjects for technical discussions and development action.

The complexity of FSDSs requires institutional collaboration among research and development organisations as well as among institutions at various administrative levels (local authorities, central, regional and international). Such collaboration will be necessary for the implementation of development programmes and projects, as well as for the elaboration of methodologies which integrate different scientific approaches.
A programme for the improvement of food supply and distribution systems

The World Food Summit held at FAO-Rome in November 1996 gave priority to improving the efficiency of marketing systems and linkages between production and consumption areas, with the aim of increasing access to food, and hence food security, in developing countries and countries in transition. The Habitat II Conference in 1996 drew attention to the increasing urbanisation levels and the rapid urban growth rates in DTCs, and stressed their direct relationship with urban poverty levels. The Urban Food Supply and Distribution to Cities Programme of FAO addresses the relationship between urbanisation, urban growth, food marketing and food security, and constitutes a major contribution to follow-up and implementation of the commitments made by FAO member States at the World Food Summit.

In the longer term, the programme envisages improved food security of the poorest sectors of urban consumers in DTCs. This will be fulfilled by more dynamic and efficient FSDSs which improve the availability of food available to the poorest consumers in terms of price, volume, variety and quality and expanded national food production to cater for urban food needs. This requires that policies, strategies and development programmes take into account food supply and distribution issues, at different geographical levels.

The number of countries which will benefit from the activities and the assistance of the programme will depend on the interest expressed by each country and the level of donors' support to the programme.

Geographic coverage of the programme

A wider circulation of information and documentation, national capacity building, inter-institutional dialogue and collaboration, an appropriate methodology, and local and regional expertise, represent the strategic axes of the programme which will directly benefit policy makers and FSDS actors namely: central government, local authorities, chambers of commerce and agriculture, associations of consumers, traders, producers, transporters, NGOs, research institutes, financial institutions, etc.). The programme will also benefit the poorest sections of urban society (through their improved access to food), small and medium scale traders (through a more dynamic and competitive trade system) and food producers (through their better integration in the market). The main outputs of the programme will include a more precise assessment of the consequences of urban dynamics on FSDS, improved technical competence and proposals for policies and interventions at urban, periurban and rural levels.
Programme structure and implementation

The programme is ongoing. The first phase (1995-1997), represented by the Food Supply and Distribution to Francophone African Cities sub-regional programme was funded by France, Italy and FAO. Several national and international organisations and universities also contributed.

This phase made it possible to define the state of the art in current research and knowledge about FSDSs, to collect specific technical documentation and to prepare the development programme of FSDSs in Dakar. The FAO-ISRA sub-regional seminar Food supply and distribution to Francophone African cities, held in Dakar, Senegal in April 1997, was attended by the mayors of a number of African cities. This seminar identified the nature of FSDS constraints and evaluated their importance for urban food security. Its main recommendations included: the urgency to reduce the cost of food supply and distribution, the need to develop specialisation and competence at all levels, the need for adequate services and well-managed infrastructure together with specific rules as well as a legislative framework adapted to the evolving socio-economic contexts. The important role played by local authorities in FSDS development and the interdependence of urban, peri-urban and rural areas was also underlined.

Phase II of the programme makes available to institutions and professionals in DTCs a package of products and services, which include:

- the Food into Cities Journal and Collection, which provide free access to specialised electronic documentation;
- the Food into Cities informal network, which facilitates collaboration and exchange of experience and assistance among researchers, professionals and institutions; a methodology for the analysis of FSDSs and for the formulation of investment and development programmes which can be adapted to local circumstances; and specialised web sites.

The second phase of the programme will, subject to the availability of donor funding, comprise five independent regional sub-programmes: Sub-Saharan Africa; North Africa and the Near East; Asia and the Pacific; Latin America and the Caribbean; Central and Eastern Europe. Sub-programmes will be structured into independent regional and national components. Regional component comprise information, research and training activities organised at regional level. Each national component includes activities, to be organised in selected countries through specific national projects, aimed at capacity building and the formulation of policies, strategies and programmes.

The preparation of an inter-regional conference Local Authorities and Urban Food Security in the XXIst century to be attended by the mayors of a number of cities from DTCs, is planned to conclude the second phase of the programme.
This conference will highlight the important role which local authorities, which are often the forgotten partners in development, can play in improving urban food security. It will also formulate a plan of action to improve FSDS efficiency and promote collaboration and exchange among local authorities at South-South and North-South levels.

Components of sub-programmes


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