



Urban food security



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By 2005, over half the world's people will live in cities. Supplying them with safe and affordable food will strain the food supply and distribution chain to the breaking point. The challenge is greatest in the developing world's cities, where urban poverty rates often exceed 50 percent. This interview with Olivio Argenti, FAO urban food security specialist, highlights some of the issues to be faced.

► **Urban populations are steadily increasing. What are the implications for their food security and safety?**

"Urbanization is likely to eat up the productive land, pushing food production further and further away. This increases the cost of all activities associated with producing food and bringing it to cities, calling for massive investments. The consequences are all the more critical where infrastructure and services such as transport, storage, slaughterhouses and markets are already overstretched, which is the situation in most cities in developing countries. If the population is growing 9 or 10 percent a year, as is the case in some African cities, it will double in less than a decade. In Latin America, cities are growing more slowly, but the urban population is already 75% and still increasing."

► **How does urban food production help improve food security in cities?**

"Urban agriculture does contribute to feeding urban populations. About 200 million urban farmers throughout the world supply food to 700 million people. However, there are a lot of risks associated with urban food production, especially the risk of contamination. I recently visited an urban agricultural area in Mexico near a river into which all the sewage goes from the nearby village. They use the mud to prepare seed beds and the water to water the vegetables. I asked the authorities if they were aware of the danger, and they said that they were not in a position to do anything because they didn't have the financial or technical means."

"Unfortunately, the health risk has paved the ground for authorities to try to prevent urban food production rather than find solutions to the contamination. The point is to not take an anti-production approach, but to try to facilitate safe



food production. It is a very important source of food, such as vegetables, fruits and meat, which are usually absent from the diets of low-income families."

► **One of the keys to enhancing urban food security and safety is the improvement of the food supply and distribution chain.**

How does it work?

"The food supply and distribution chain is the set of activities in rural, peri-urban and urban areas that provide urban households with a variety of food products. The chain begins with production of food and includes food assembly, packaging, transport, storage, processing, buying and selling – both wholesale and retail, as well as street vending. The efficiency of the chain is certainly important, as is its capacity to provide stable supplies of good-quality and safe food. However, it is not sufficient to ensure food security. If you don't have money, you're out of the system. Or if your consumption habits are wrong, an efficient chain isn't going to resolve that."

► **What role do local governments play in creating the right conditions for feeding their cities?**

"In most developing countries, local governments and authorities are responsible for establishing regulations for food hygiene and trade. They build and manage the markets and are responsible for road construction, which is crucial to get food to markets. Expanding cities need more and more infrastructure, transport facilities, slaughterhouses.

"Unfortunately, food supply and distribution aspects are often taken into consideration in

urban planning and management decisions without the necessary understanding of the complex interrelation of activities. As a result, existing markets are not maintained, new markets remain underutilized and conflicts often occur between food producers, traders and street vendors.

"Local authorities are being given more and more responsibilities each day because of decentralization programmes, but often without the necessary financial, human and technical resources. We must remember that there are cities whose municipal authorities have a budget of one dollar per year per inhabitant. With a budget like that, you have to look to the private sector. With competent human resources, local authorities can improve the soundness and sustainability of their intervention programmes and create favourable conditions for higher private investment."

► **What is the role of national or central governments?**

"What happens in a city is also a result of the national context. For example, what a central government does to combat inflation will also determine the cost of food at the local level. Whether or not there is an adequate supply of affordable and safe food in a city also depends on how much the central government invests in agricultural production and development in rural areas. These two layers of government intervention are sometimes conflicting, and often there is not enough coordination between them."

► **How does FAO contribute to urban food security and safety?**

"Traditionally FAO has assisted central governments in enhancing food security, mostly in rural areas, by improving production and marketing systems, identifying vulnerable groups, forecasting production levels and creating early warning systems to assess food

shortages. For a long time, FAO has also been involved in food safety – for example, with assistance to reduce food contamination both at production level, with advice on the appropriate use of fertilizers, pesticides and so forth, and at the street level, with advice on how to assure proper hygiene when handling prepared meals or snacks that are sold on the streets.

"During the last few years, FAO has also been concentrating on the role of local authorities, who have traditionally been forgotten partners but who have a tremendous impact on food security at local level. FAO is now able to provide much-needed technical assistance to local governments so that they can perform better today – and be prepared for tomorrow.

KEY FACTS

- In Latin America and the Caribbean 75 percent of the population lives in cities; this figure will climb to 83 percent by 2030. Comparable figures for Asia and the Pacific are 37 and 53 percent; for Africa, 38 and 55 percent.
- Twenty cities now have a population of more than 10 million.
- In urban areas, people spend an average of 30 percent more on food than in rural areas but they consume fewer calories.
- Long distances, bad roads, poorly maintained trucks and urban crowding cause spoilage of 10 to 30 percent of produce in transit.
- City and suburban farms supply food to about 700 million city dwellers – one-quarter of the world's urban population.