



## **CITY REGION FOOD SYSTEMS**

### **Sustainable Food Systems and Urbanization**

## **AN OVERVIEW**

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### **AN OVERVIEW**

**Sustainable food systems, rural development and urbanization need to be better understood in relation to each other.** This paper grows out of a nearly year-long multi-stakeholder process that has spanned deliberations in Rome, New York, Medellin, and Bonn, all linked by a collaborative effort to articulate the usefulness of **city region food systems (CRFS)** and **rural-urban linkages** that is critical to **sustainable food systems** for the future. In the process, several stakeholders including UN agencies, local authorities associations, nongovernmental and civil society organizations, foundations, and research organizations, among others, have developed a Call to Action<sup>1</sup> and agreed to work together on a global platform for knowledge gathering and exchange.

**The food system links agriculture and urban centers of various sizes, including cities and secondary towns.** The **food system** itself is complex and multi-layered, including food production, distribution, processing, marketing, consumption and waste, as well as supportive infrastructure. There is a need to better understand the appropriate scales and entry points for food system development that can best achieve the transformations considered essential to feed a rapidly growing and urbanizing planet and respect, protect and fulfill the commitments to rights-based development frameworks made by states. Enhanced knowledge gathering and exchange can support this. The initial stakeholders in this knowledge gathering effort considers that improved rural-urban connectivity is critical to achieve sustainable food systems, and the city region food system framework provides one useful approach to help move concretely towards that goal.

**The relationship between urban and rural spaces, peoples and environments is vital,** and is undoubtedly one of the critical development issues that needs to be addressed in the post-2015 development agenda. Growing urban centers need productive and sustainable rural areas, including smallholders along the value chain. While critical urban-rural linkages go beyond food systems to include labor, migration, ecosystem services, input and output markets etc., integrated city region food and agriculture systems are a key dimension of the rural-urban nexus that needs to be explored and developed in order to contribute to a more sustainable urbanization and equitable rural development.

**Urban centers, and the rural areas linked to them, are key drivers of local and national development processes.** Human settlements of all sizes and cities, including small and intermediate towns, link people to markets, services, food etc. and all are important parts of landscapes or territories that connect people, food and ecosystems. Thus, the term 'City region' refers not only to megacities and the immediate, proximate rural and agricultural areas surrounding them, but also to small and medium-sized towns that can serve to link the more remote small-scale producers and their agricultural value chains to urban centers and markets. However, these smallholders often need more equal access to resources, innovations, inputs, services, transport, production, transformation, processing and market facilities to be able to effectively respond to growing demand for agricultural products and foodstuffs in urban centers.

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<sup>1</sup> A *Call to Action for City Region Food Systems and Sustainable Urbanization* was first launched at the April 2014 World Urban Forum in Medellin, Columbia and can be found [here](#).

**The current global food system does not adequately sustain or support the diverse range and needs of all actors.** The needs of rural and urban poor, in particular small-scale producers are often marginalized. No city lives in isolation and urban centers depend on local as well as global food economies. People based in urban and rural areas, and particularly the disadvantaged, suffer the same global-local forces of marginalization that contribute to inequities of access, benefits and resources in both high and low income countries. The food and nutrition needs and rights of affected urban and rural people are linked in many ways, but both suffer from a tendency of policy makers and other observers to treat these communities as separate, and even as competing with each other.

**Agricultural value chains that link urban centers and consumers to agricultural producers in their vicinity and in their rural hinterlands as well as alternative food systems need to be strengthened.** There is an international trend to depend on international commodity markets to source food needs for urban centers. However, international markets are often volatile, and the global food system is not always resilient to shocks, and food quality is not always sufficient to address malnutrition. Shorter value chains that supply fresh and minimally processed foods can help alleviate these problems, balanced with stronger linkages with hinterland agricultural producers. Strengthening farm to near market infrastructure can help to reduce the marginalization of small-scale producers while addressing the food, land and resource needs of the most vulnerable populations. Strong city region food systems can, at least in part, address some of these issues, by supporting the development of rights-based alternative food systems that are economically, environmentally and socially sustainable.

**A territorial, or landscape, approach is key.** A city region food system lens leads us to recognize the diverse systems in which urbanization dynamics are taking place and that these systems include both urban and rural elements. Urbanization is not an independent process from the development of agriculture and food systems, rather it is a combination of *content* (service and industrial sector expansion) and *form* (spatial dynamics), driven by the differing conditions of, and opportunities for, labor productivity, income, employment opportunities, etc. Furthermore there is economic and development potential in rural as well as urban areas. Potentials in the agriculture and food systems that link urban and rural areas need to be maximized as a normal part of a balanced development process.

**How can a strong city region food system benefit sustainable urbanization?** Sustainable urbanization requires and depends on rural areas and the people who live and work in them – for food, agricultural products, labor, ecosystem services etc. Food systems link rural and urban populations in a region within a country, across regions, and sometimes between continents. Rural producers can, under the right conditions, benefit from urban demand for their products, more efficient agricultural commodity chains, and increased demand to provide urban centers with food, water, natural resources, energy and labor. Urban food demand can stimulate the development of food systems and agricultural value chains, and the emergence of new, higher value markets related to evolving consumption patterns (e.g. fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and dairy). However, there are constraints that undermine the capacity to take full advantage of new opportunities in city region food systems. These include poor and insecure access to, or control over, productive assets financial services, knowledge and technology, and lack of access to modern energy, transport and infrastructure. Addressing such constraints partly depends on strengthening rural-urban connectivity via infrastructure, input and output markets, financial and rural advisory services, access to information and ICTs. Access to these services, and in particular land, natural resources, seeds, and fair markets for small-scale producers, is a critical component towards improving the living and working conditions for these populations, whilst also streamlining and operationalizing human rights obligations.

**The rural-urban nexus is a central element of many contemporary food systems.** The interdependencies and the linkages between urban and rural development are at the heart of a City Region Food Systems approach<sup>2</sup>. This approach recognizes the need to enhance rural-urban connectivity to maximize the potential benefits, employment and poverty reducing opportunities related to urbanization. Such a focus also recognizes the need to reduce rural-urban inequalities, invest in both urban and rural spaces and employment opportunities, promote better rural-urban connectivity, and take advantage of urbanization to spur the development of inclusive food systems and a broader rural transformation. For example, markets of all kinds found in urban areas (farmers direct, retail, wholesale etc.) are the most tangible exchanges of goods, services, people and capital between rural and urban areas. Urban drivers of rural transformation include consumption preferences and needs of urban populations leveraged through procurement practices of individuals and institutions. The high interdependence of urban and rural landscapes and the importance of rural-urban linkages to promoting environmental sustainability for transformative change underscore the importance of rural-urban development synergies and the role of agriculture and inclusive food systems for urban and rural-based populations. Balanced city region, urban and rural, investment and development are critical to achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Rural and urban are mutually dependent, and development can and should be mutually reinforcing.

**The benefits of city region food systems:** Improved city region food systems will help balance the urban and rural to improve economic, social and environmental conditions. Access to affordable nutritious, and fairly traded foods from local, regional and distant producers will be more easily available to both rich and poor, rural and urban. Access to markets and support to alternative markets, both local and distant, will be available to small-scale producers, not just large ones. Shorter value chains, and more broadly efficient and functioning agricultural value chains that link hinterland producers to markets, can contribute ingredients to stabilize livelihoods in distribution, processing and manufacture of food and fiber products. This can also contribute to managing nutrient and waste flows from production through to consumption. Direct farmers, retail and wholesale markets that provision the food and nutrition security of towns and cities -- *market systems* -- are major economic drivers for prosperity. In addition to food, city regions can benefit from clean water and other natural resources -- *ecosystem services* -- and flows of labor that unite nature, people and local economies. Finally, when these services are well integrated by government, private sector and civil society actions to serve economic, social and environmental values simultaneously, then a healthy symbiosis of towns and the rural areas around them, may be concretely realized.

**There are thousands of city regions of different types in the world.** A city region food system approach recognizes that there is great *diversity* between contexts, the nature of urbanization, sizes of urban center (from small and intermediate towns to megacities), types of food systems, and nature of ties with the surrounding countryside and rural populations. For example, in those parts of Africa and Asia where urbanization is expected to grow most rapidly, and where urban settlements will expand into areas that have hitherto been predominantly rural, competing for land used for agriculture, the challenges are dramatically different than those faced in cities of the global north and their need to retrofit human settlements to integrate urban and rural areas even if they do not grow as dramatically. Whether expanding or retrofitting, addressing city region food systems necessarily includes improving the management and governance of farming systems to be more environmentally sustainable, resilient to climate change, and respecting international rights obligations and frameworks. Cities must diversify their food supply options to protect themselves

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<sup>2</sup> Several recent papers make this point, including for example IFAD's Post 2015 policy brief, Leveraging the Rural Urban Nexus, <http://www.ifad.org/pub/post2015/english/1.pdf> and EcoAgriculture Partners paper on City Regions as Landscapes for People, Food and Nature, [http://landscapes.ecoagriculture.org/global\\_review/city\\_regions](http://landscapes.ecoagriculture.org/global_review/city_regions)

from severe weather shocks. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to addressing challenges and opportunities related to city region food systems. Appropriate responses are more likely when better informed by evidence and knowledge gathered from different contexts and actors. A nuanced and inclusive approach will better address the real needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations. In 2014, a group of diverse stakeholders began planning the establishment of a CRFS knowledge platform to address the many ways that city region food systems can develop.

**Challenges will continue to persist:** As populations gravitate towards urban centers, whether megacities or small and medium-sized towns, there are increasing difficulties in meeting the needs and realizing the rights of growing urban populations. However, this is not a linear process, as in some contexts we observe movements between rural areas and even a return from urban centers to rural areas and investment in agriculture. Managing the available, accessible and acceptable land and natural resources sufficient to ensure a dignified life, access to services, materials, facilities and infrastructure in both urban areas and their surrounding rural areas is needed.<sup>i</sup> National institutions must work towards ensuring that all citizens living in urban and rural areas have equitable, affordable and sustainable access to natural and common resources, including adequate amounts of safe and nutritious food and water.<sup>ii</sup>

**A multi-stakeholder approach will be essential to address challenges:** The key actors involved are different in each context and they often have competing interests. These interests need to be taken into account and addressed in a fair and equitable way in policy and decision processes in order to achieve balanced city region food system development that can benefit all: from poor small-scale producers and family farmers, traders, processors through to urban consumers requiring fresh, nutritious and affordable foods. These create specific challenges and opportunities relating to the development of particular regions and territories. An inclusive and participatory city region food system approach coupled with territorial or regional development approaches can assist national and local governments to plan in an integrated way for the equal provision of services in urban and rural areas and to the people that live in them. At a minimum, a city region food system agenda will require collaboration between all levels of government (national, regional and local), nongovernmental and community-based organizations, farmers’ organizations, the private sector, the research and philanthropic communities and international support.

**People, community-based organizations and farmers’ organizations are vital to successful city region food systems.** While engagement of governments, local government representatives, NGOs and the private sector is needed, most community development included in local food systems in the world is achieved by individual, joint and collective initiatives, including farmers’ organizations, in processes that are often delinked from the formal market and institutions. There is a need for greater understanding of how current local/regional food systems have formed and are functioning, and how policy at all levels can provide greater support towards positive, or endogenous local practices. Direct involvement of local communities, with particular attention to smallholders, small-scale producers and agricultural workers, in dialogue and policy decision-making will make these needs more apparent.

**Summary and what’s next:** The development of economically, environmentally and socially sustainable city region food systems that integrate urban and rural sectors and actors such as small-scale producers (both those that are more proximate and distant to urban centers) will be useful to ensure that urban centers can meet food and ecosystem services for sustainable urbanization and to maximize the economic, employment and social opportunities for rural populations. A CRFS knowledge platform will be very useful to share information, knowledge and experience regarding different contexts and approaches. It will provide a platform to share evidence on the key trends and drivers of the linkages between rural and urban areas, people, their organizations and

enterprises in relation to food systems, from production through to consumption, and on the diverse nature of city region food systems in distinct contexts. For more information and to engage with the CRFS community, please visit the new home for this collaborative multi-stakeholder effort at [www.cityregionfoodsystems.org](http://www.cityregionfoodsystems.org).

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- <sup>i</sup> UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Article 11, para. 1., 16 December 1966
- <sup>ii</sup> GC4, para. 8(b).