

Testing strategies to help Kenya's urban poor get access to food

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In Kenya's urban areas, there's a serious problem of people not having enough food, particularly in the capital city of Nairobi.



Image source: www.pexels.com

{{image}}

Those who live in low-income settlements earn very low wages – for instance around [67%](#) of the urban poor are informal workers who earn about \$130 each month. As a result residents spend over [half of their daily income](#) buying food, because basic food items such as maize flour are expensive. This is due to a combination of [soaring global commodity prices](#), poor harvests and [post-harvest food losses](#) which have led to a sharp rise in the cost of food since 2007.

To make ends meet, families are forced to take [fewer meals](#) and data shows that over [80%](#) of households in low-income settlements don't have access to enough nutritious food.

This situation has serious consequences, particularly for children. Research by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) [shows that](#) about half of children under five years of age living in Nairobi's low-income settlements are chronically undernourished (stunted) and about a third of women of reproductive age are underweight.

The Covid-19 pandemic [further complicates](#) the situation. At least [one million](#) Kenyans have lost their jobs and there's been a disruption to food supply from rural areas because of containment measures.

In theory, governments are duty bound to ensure that their people have food. The realisation of the right to food [is when](#) every person lives in conditions that allow them to produce food or to purchase it. In Kenya, this is [enshrined](#) in the constitution.

The government can fulfil this right by putting accountability at the heart of food security policies. For instance, by publicly declaring that it recognises its responsibility – as Brazil did with its [zero hunger programme](#) – and establishing standards

and procedures for the implementation of food security policies and programmes. In addition, the government can also monitor food production levels and prices while keeping track of how food insecure people are. Indonesia is one country that has [this strategy](#) in place.

In Kenya, there is still a long way to go to ensure that this right is enjoyed by all. For instance, there are currently no measures in place to fully regulate the price of basic needs, especially food. A key way to hold the government accountable is to ensure communities know that they have a right to food. This empowers them to demand the right and urges those responsible to put strategies in place that realise the right.

Right to food initiative

For the past two years, my colleagues and I have been working on the right to food issue through the [Right To Food Project](#). This works with communities in low-income settlements in Kenya to understand their experiences and engage them on their rights. We also organise dialogue with policymakers.

The aim is to influence policy decisions towards the realisation of the right to food. We do this by identifying and documenting the realities of the urban poor and their experiences with regard to food insecurity. We then present recommendations to relevant change agents, such as policymakers. This amplifies the voice of communities and ensures that their experiences and insights are part of this process.

So far, our initiative has revealed that barriers to food access occur mainly due to poverty. People earn too little to buy enough food. They also rely heavily on purchased food, as they can't grow their own. The food that they can buy is often of poor quality, not very nutritious and produced in an environment with low food safety standards.

Some urban poor resort to risky strategies, such as scavenging for food from dump sites or engaging in crime, to get food.

Engagement on the Right to Food

Our initial focus was on Nairobi. We worked with eight community groups to engage communities in ten informal settlements. Moving forward, we will include the County of Kisumu, a project that will end in 2022. Within these communities the aims were to engage them on their right to food, their role and the obligations of the government in the realisation of the right.

This government's obligation is not to take measures that arbitrarily deprive people of their right to food. For instance, one finding from our project is that the government needs to address the issue of taxation especially of food staples in order to lower food prices for the urban poor.

It was also important that – although highlighting the role the government should play in providing food – communities suggest strategies that would work for them. For instance, the communities said that they wanted be enabled to grow their own food.

This is where the dialogues convened by the project were useful. For instance, though people may want to grow food, it's not always possible. We set up dialogue between political leaders, which included local chiefs, representatives of members of parliament, representatives from the Nairobi County Women Representative office, and officers from the Ministry of Agriculture. The community could voice the challenges they face when it comes to urban farming: a lack of agricultural skills, farming land, and money to buy inputs such as seeds.

Following this dialogue, the Ministry of Agriculture agreed to ensure agricultural extension officers reach urban poor settings to support urban farmers and improve the implementation of the 2015 Nairobi Urban Agriculture Promotion and Regulation Act, which pledges to improve people's capacity in food production.

This commitment to improve policy is crucial, but so is ensuring that these new laws and policies are enforced. To this end the project is undertaking an audit and review of existing policies – such as the [2017 Food Security Bill](#) – and legislation in Kenya in order to identify the extent to which food security concerns of the urban poor have been addressed, and engage for change.

As seen through this case, through public engagement this project can help to enhance the communities' understanding of the concept of their right to food and provide opportunities to explore potential strategies that will work for them.

Hilda Owii, David Osogo, Florence Sipalla and Michelle Mbuthia from APHRC contributed to the writing of this article.

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