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# Looking beyond urban agriculture

## Extending urban food policy responses

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## Executive Summary

Although there are high levels of food insecurity<sup>i</sup> in South Africa's cities and towns, the problem continues to be framed as predominantly rural in nature. This has led to policies and programmes that fail to acknowledge urban food insecurity. Local governments have no clear mandate to address food insecurity, and tend to take their lead in any food security programming from national and provincial objectives. This has led to urban agriculture becoming the default response to food insecurity in urban areas.

There is however little evidence to support the continued promotion of urban agriculture as the only local government response. The uptake of urban agriculture varies considerably across the country, but is below 10% in most of the metros. Available evidence indicates that it does not play a significant role in household consumption and is not a viable income generation strategy. There are significant weaknesses in available data, which make it hard to justify current levels of support for urban agriculture.

This policy brief makes two sets of recommendations, the first aim to increase the viability of urban agriculture, and the second set are to encourage municipalities to think beyond urban agriculture. In order to increase the viability of urban agriculture municipalities should develop outcome and impact monitoring and evaluation, partner with NGOs, and facilitate access to land and protect land for urban production. However, more importantly municipalities need to look beyond urban agriculture to address food insecurity. Expecting the urban poor, who have the least access to the resources (money, land, tools, seed, knowledge, equipment) necessary to establish successful agricultural ventures, to "grow their own" in order to uplift themselves out of poverty, fails to recognise the massive barriers constraining urban agriculture in South African cities. Municipalities should therefore view urban agriculture as part of the wider food system, strengthen linkages between urban agriculture and other parts of the urban food system,

seek to develop alternative food security programmes and policies within their existing mandates, and develop food security strategies which address the multiple drivers of food insecurity in order to achieve food security for all.

## Background

**There are high levels of food insecurity in South Africa's towns and cities.** The SANHANES survey found national prevalence of households at risk hunger to be 28% and experiencing hunger, 26%. The equivalent figures in urban informal areas were 32% and 36% respectively.

**Despite this, there is very little policy attention paid to urban food insecurity.** National and provincial policy and programming continues to view food insecurity as primarily rural in nature. This leads to predominantly rural-oriented policies and programmes.

The promotion of urban agriculture has been the major food security intervention at the urban scale. It has consistently been national government's lens for engaging the urban food security challenge. The current Strategic Planning document of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries only DAFF engages the urban only through the lens of urban agriculture.

The food security response mechanisms of the new National Policy on Food and Nutrition Security do not provide explicit guidance on urban food security strategies, but suggests a production and social safety net-based set of solutions. It argues that the Policy should serve as a guide to national, provincial and local government in pursuing food security at every level.

**The main local government response to food insecurity has been to promote urban agriculture.** Municipal IDPs consistently frame urban food production as their main approach to alleviating food security. These programmes are often aligned to provincial programmes and strategic goals. The City of Cape Town has formalised its commitment to urban food production through the Urban Agriculture Policy and the Food Gardens Policy in Cape Town.

**There are, however, a number of points of innovation that suggest a wider conceptualisation of appropriate responses to food insecurity is possible.** These include:

- 1) Recognising the role of the Fresh Produce Market as a means to generate a more inclusive food system (Buffalo City)
- 2) Recognising the municipal role in the characteristics of value chains (Ekurhuleni and Johannesburg)
- 3) Recognising the need for planning to consider the generation of food networks (Ekurhuleni), and the need to understand the spatial determinants of food insecurity (Johannesburg, Mangaung)

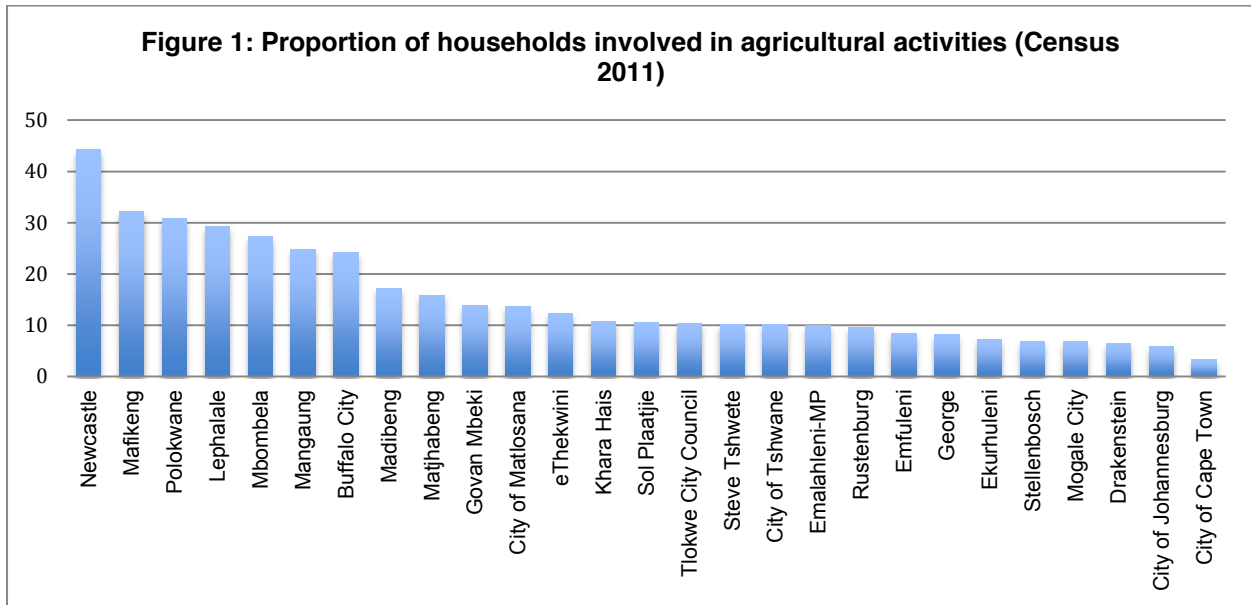
- 4) Connecting food security to climate change mitigation strategies (eThekweni, Cape Town)
- 5) Developing a co-ordinated multi-pronged approach to food security (Johannesburg)
- 6) The need to engage stakeholders outside of municipal government (Johannesburg)
- 7) Conducting baseline evaluations to determine different levels of food security in different municipal wards (Johannesburg)

**The NDP (National Development plan) provides a wider perspective on food security which connects food and nutrition security to wider systemic issues. This justifies a local government approach which extends food security responses beyond urban agriculture.**

## Critique of Existing Policy

**The existing dominance of urban agriculture as the response to urban food insecurity does not provide an adequate response to the urban challenge. Expecting the urban poor, who have the least access to the resources (money, land, tools, seed, knowledge, equipment) necessary to establish successful agricultural ventures, to "grow their own" in order to uplift themselves out of poverty, fails to recognise the massive barriers constraining urban agriculture in South African cities.**

**There is limited uptake of urban agriculture.** Despite considerable programmatic attention, there is limited uptake of urban agriculture, particularly within the metros (See Figure 1). The pro-poor AFSUN surveys found limited uptake of urban agriculture and a low frequency of sourcing food from own production (Cape Town – 5%, Johannesburg - 9%, Msunduzi – 30%). In 2013 AFSUN conducted a follow up survey that sampled in high-, middle- and low-income areas across Cape Town. In this survey, just 2.3% of households in low-income areas sourced any food from own production, while almost 10% in high-income areas did.



**There is little evidence to suggest that urban agriculture is making a contribution to food and nutrition security.** An international review of data on urban agriculture’s contribution to food and nutrition security found that available evidence does not support claims made about urban agriculture’s contribution to food security (See Warren et. al. 2015). Data from the General Household Survey supports this assertion (Burger et al 2009). Local case studies across South Africa have shown limited importance of urban agriculture for household food security. Additionally, there is little evidence to suggest urban agriculture plays an indirect role in food security through the provision of livelihoods. Incomes from sales of produce are generally low.

**There is little evidence to suggest that urban agriculture practitioners are drawn from the most vulnerable households.** Urban agriculture is promoted as a strategy to empower and alleviate poverty and food security for the most vulnerable households. However, many participants do not fall into this category, in part because the most vulnerable cannot afford the time between investment in production to harvest, or the risk of crop failure, and frequently do not have access to suitable land. International case studies suggest that the poorest households and recent migrants are unable to access land or lack the required social networks to enable them to farm.

**The general evidence base is extremely weak.** It is extremely hard to make a compelling case for

the continued focus on urban agriculture due to the limited data available on its participation and impacts. This is made worse by the input-based monitoring and evaluation approaches of many State- and NGO-supported projects.

**The focus on urban production alone separates urban agriculture from the wider food system and therefore limits its potential effectiveness.** The exclusive focus on urban agriculture treats it as apart from the wider food system, rather than as a part of the wider food system. This means that it fails to account for the reasons why there may not be viable local markets for urban agriculture products. In order for urban agriculture to meet its potential, it needs to be considered as part of a wider suite of food security and food system interventions. The current support for urban agriculture as the dominant food security intervention in fact hinders its potential and a more systemic approach asking broader questions about urban land use might improve the viability of this practice. It is also important to note that there is considerable diversity of urban food production within South African cities, with larger commercial and semi-commercial agriculture also being practiced. This generally falls outside of the scope of urban agriculture projects, but also require consideration. These are also a vital part of the urban food system and require greater policy attention, particularly with regard to land use planning.

## Recommendations

**There are two main sets of recommendations. The first set is designed to increase urban agriculture's potential impact on food security, while the second one ought to encourage municipalities to think beyond urban agriculture.**

### ***Improving urban agriculture:***

**Better monitoring and evaluation.** If urban agriculture is to be supported it is essential that the evidence base be improved. It is recommended that given the existing levels of government and NGO interest in support of urban agriculture, efforts be made to improve urban agriculture's capacity to increase food security. At present there is good monitoring of inputs (how many seedlings are distributed etc.), and some basic monitoring of outputs (how many beneficiaries, for example). There is next to no monitoring of impact, such as what is being produced, where the produce goes, or what impact it has on household consumption. It is therefore impossible to argue for its contribution to food security, to co-ordinate and plan appropriate interventions or to learn from successes.

**Partner with NGOs.** There are many NGOs working to support urban agriculture. These may have greater institutional capacity to support farmers. At present there is limited or ad hoc engagement with these partners. An example of good practice is the City of Cape Town's MOU with an urban agriculture NGO which will help them train potential growers.

**Facilitate access to land and protect land for urban production.** There is intense competition for land in urban areas. Municipalities should audit land available for agricultural production at various scales, facilitate access to suitable land, and provide existing producers with clear indications of the relative security of their usufruct rights. This will enable producers to plan production strategies. Urban agriculture should be considered part of multifunctional green infrastructure and explicitly integrated with functions including stormwater management, bio-waste re-use, and non-motorised transport.

### ***Beyond Urban Agriculture***

**Urban agriculture cannot be viewed in isolation.** Existing programmes locate urban agriculture as the municipalities' only entry point to alleviate food insecurity. This approach fails to

view urban agriculture as part of the wider food system. It therefore means that plans to enable farmers to market their produce fail to account for factors that hinder this, such as the market channels that deliver fresh produce to street vendors than producers can feasibly sell for. Municipalities must develop an understanding of the local food system, in order to develop urban agriculture production and marketing strategies that benefit producers, and support small-scale producers and enterprises.

### **Develop alternative food security programmes.**

Urban agriculture is not significantly impacting food insecurity. Food insecurity is a manifestation of structural challenges in the food system and urban system. Expecting the urban poor, who have the least access to the resources (money, land, tools, seed, knowledge, equipment) necessary to establish successful agricultural ventures, to "grow their own" in order to uplift themselves out of poverty, fails to recognise the massive barriers constraining urban agriculture in South African cities.

Although there is no formal mandate for local government to address food insecurity, there are many things that municipalities can do within their existing mandates to alleviate food insecurity, as many municipal functions shape the food systems that feed the poor. These include considering food security in spatial planning objectives, integrating formal and informal food retailing spaces, supporting fresh produce markets to increase their role in local, pro-poor food value chains.

**Develop a food system strategy.** Municipalities can play an important role in alleviating food security. In order to achieve this, there is a need for municipalities to develop an understanding of the extent, characteristics and drivers of food insecurity, and then to develop a suite of policy and programmatic responses within existing municipal mandates to work towards ensuring food security for all.

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<sup>i</sup> For the purpose of this study, the WHO/FAO definition of food security has been adopted: “Food security is ... the situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (WHO/FAO 1996).