

Enhancing Rural-Urban Linkages Through Food Remittances

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Executive Summary

In many rapidly urbanizing African countries, food remittances from rural to urban areas play a vital role in maintaining rural-urban linkages. In Nairobi, Kenya, half of all households, regardless of migration status, receive food remittances from rural areas. Contrary to conventional beliefs, these food transfers are not solely linked to migration or poverty. Instead, they appear to be a long-standing, integral part of urban household resilience, especially for better-off households. As urbanization intensifies, policymakers should recognize the role of food remittances in ensuring food security for both migrants and non-migrant households. This brief explores key challenges such as economic inequality, the persistence of circular migration, and the vulnerability of urban households to economic shocks. It offers targeted recommendations to strengthen these food remittance networks, which are essential for building urban resilience in the context of rapid urbanization and rural-urban interdependency.



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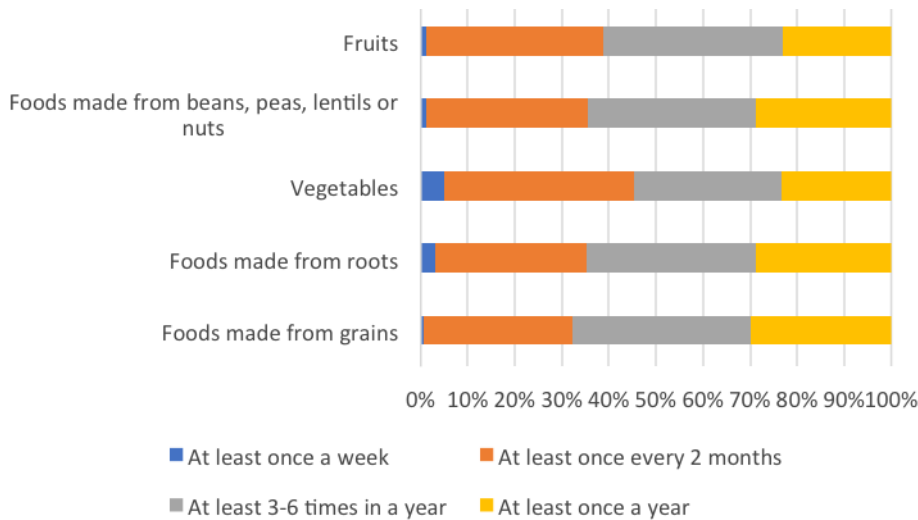
Introduction

Urbanization is accelerating across Sub-Saharan Africa, with Nairobi, Kenya's capital, growing at a rapid pace. By 2025, Nairobi's population is projected to reach 6.2 million, placing immense pressure on its food systems, housing, and social infrastructure. Approximately 60% of Nairobi's residents live in informal settlements, where access to basic services such as clean water, healthcare, and food is a daily challenge. Rural-urban food remittances provide a crucial buffer against food insecurity for many of these households. Migrant and non-migrant households alike rely on a steady stream of food supplies from rural areas, particularly during harvesting seasons in rural communities and times of economic stress in urban centres. These transfers help to maintain strong familial and cultural ties between urban and rural communities, reflecting the continued importance of rural livelihoods for urban sustenance.

Food remittances encompass various types of food items, including cereals (maize), vegetables, roots and tubers, fruits, and animal products. These food supplies are not merely a survival strategy for the poorest households but are also used by middle- and higher-income households to supplement their diets and diversify food sources. As Kenya continues to urbanize, policymakers must understand the significance of food remittances in shaping urban food security and design policies that support and enhance these critical food pathways.

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Figure 1: Frequency of Food Remittances from Rural Areas to Nairobi



Key Challenges

1. Rural-Urban Connectivity

Kenya’s urbanization process has not severed ties between rural and urban areas. Instead, circular migration patterns remain strong, with urban residents continuing to maintain connections with their rural homes. According to survey data, over 50% of households in Nairobi receive food remittances from rural relatives. These food transfers are often informal and non-monetized, making them harder to track than cash remittances. However, their impact is significant, particularly for urban households with limited access to affordable food in Nairobi’s markets.

Migrants and non-migrant households alike participate in these food networks, challenging the assumption that only migrants rely on rural food supplies. This suggests that food remittances are part of a broader cultural practice of sharing and reciprocity, which is deeply embedded in Kenyan society. Understanding the nuances of rural-urban connectivity is key to designing policies that strengthen these linkages and enhance food security in rapidly urbanizing regions.

2. Economic Inequality and Food Security

Urban food insecurity is often associated with poverty, but evidence from Nairobi suggests that receipt of food remittances is more common among better-off households. These households tend to have members engaged in wage employment in the city, allowing them to maintain regular contact with rural relatives and benefit from mutual transfers of

food and cash between the rural and urban households. This raises important questions about the distribution of food resources across income groups and highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to food security policy.

While poorer households in informal settlements face severe food insecurity, better-off households use food remittances to supplement their diets, ensuring access to fresh and diverse traditional food items that may not be readily available in urban markets. This points to the broader role that food remittances play in enhancing dietary diversity and nutritional outcomes, even for relatively food-secure households.

3. Household Dynamics and Gender Considerations

Household structure plays a critical role in determining access to food remittances. Larger households and those headed by women are more likely to receive food remittances. Female-headed households often maintain strong ties to rural areas, relying on food transfers to support their children and extended families. The gendered nature of migration and food security means that policies must account for the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women in both urban and rural settings.

Moreover, food remittances are not exclusively driven by economic need. Many households view these transfers as a way of maintaining social ties with rural relatives, reinforcing traditional practices of kinship and support. Policymakers should recognize the cultural significance of

food remitting and ensure that programs aimed at strengthening food security do not disrupt these important social networks.

4. Shocks and Vulnerability to External Factors

Contrary to expectations, households experiencing economic, socio-political, or biophysical shocks do not necessarily see an increase in food remittances. This suggests that food remitting is a stable support mechanism, rather than a reactive one, indicating the resilience of rural-urban food networks even in times of crisis. However, the absence of increased remittances during shocks also underscores the limitations of relying solely on food transfers to mitigate the impacts of external disruptions, such as price increases, climate-related events, or political instability.

The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, highlighted the fragility of food supply chains, particularly in urban areas where lockdowns and movement restrictions disrupted access to markets. Rural food remittances played an essential role in cushioning some households from the worst effects of the pandemic, but they were not a panacea for the broader structural challenges facing urban food systems.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen Rural Food Production and Distribution Networks

Ensuring a consistent supply of food remittances to urban areas requires robust rural food systems. Investment in rural agriculture, including infrastructure for storage, transportation, and distribution, will enable rural households to send food to their urban relatives more efficiently. Policies should focus on reducing post-harvest losses, improving rural access to markets, and facilitating the movement of goods between rural and urban areas.

Government and development partners should prioritize agricultural extension services, support for smallholder farmers, and the development of rural food cooperatives. These initiatives will ensure that rural areas remain productive and capable of supplying food to urban households, even during periods of economic or environmental stress.

2. Promote Food Remittances as a Key Aspect of Food Security Policy

Food remittances have long been overlooked in food security planning. Governments should formally recognize the role that food transfers play in supporting urban households and include these flows in national food security strategies. This involves removing barriers to food transportation, ensuring that rural-urban food flows are not disrupted by unnecessary regulations, and facilitating the continued movement of food even during crises such as pandemics or natural disasters.

3. Leverage Mobile Technology for Efficient Food Transfers

Kenya's success with mobile money platforms like M-PESA offers a potential model for facilitating rural-urban food transfers. Digital tools can be expanded to support the coordination and timing of food transfers, ensuring that food is sent when it is most needed. Policymakers should encourage the development of mobile apps and digital marketplaces that allow rural and urban households to communicate directly, plan food shipments, and track their deliveries. This would reduce inefficiencies in the current informal system of food remitting and ensure that households receive food at optimal times, helping to smooth out seasonal variations in food availability.

4. Encourage Urban and Peri-Urban Food Production

Local agriculture initiatives can complement rural food remittances by providing additional sources of fresh produce within cities. Policymakers should support community-based urban farming projects, which can enhance food security for low-income households while reducing pressure on rural food systems. Programs that provide training, access to land, and resources for urban farmers can help diversify the urban food supply and make cities more self-sufficient in times of crisis.

5. Target Support for Vulnerable Households

While food remittances benefit many households in Nairobi, there are significant gaps in access, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable. Policymakers should develop targeted interventions that focus on these groups, ensuring that food security programs address the specific needs of migrant and non-migrant households alike. Cash transfer

programs, for example, could be expanded to help vulnerable households purchase food when remittances are insufficient. At the same time, social protection schemes should be inclusive of migrants and ensure that they can access basic services such as healthcare and education, further reducing their reliance on food remittances as a sole source of support.

Conclusion

Food remittances from rural to urban areas are a critical, yet often overlooked, component of food security in Nairobi and other rapidly growing cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. As urbanization continues to accelerate, these informal food networks will become increasingly important in ensuring that urban households have access to diverse and nutritious food sources.

Policymakers should recognize the importance of food remittances in sustaining urban livelihoods and take steps to strengthen rural-urban linkages through targeted investments, digital innovations, and inclusive social protection programs. By doing so, they can build more resilient, food-secure urban environments that are better equipped to withstand future economic, social, and environmental shocks.

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