ACCESS, NOT AVAILABILITY DRIVES URBAN HUNGER:
SACN, AFSUN, AND MDP HOST URBAN FOOD SECURITY CONFERENCE

ASTRID WOOD | 14 JUNE 2009

Urban food security has become a tremendous challenge for South African cities. African cities are urbanizing at an alarming rate of twice the global average. While food poverty and food insecurity is typically associated with rural areas, with 50 percent of world's population living in urban areas, these problems are no longer confined outside the cities. Rapid urbanization and concentrated urban poverty coupled with rising food prices, an economic downturn, and the increasing inequality suggests that poor urban households are increasingly food insecure.

To begin to tackle this crisis, municipal officials must act decisively. However, without empirical data to quantify the state of food insecurity in Southern African cities, municipal leaders are challenged to implement critical policies.

In June 2008, African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) and associated academics met in Gabarone, Botswana to design a study to assess the food conditions in Southern Africa. The Urban Food Security Baseline Survey collected data from 6,500 households and 28,700 individuals in 11 cities in 9 Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries (Gabarone, Botswana; Maseru, Lesotho; Blantyre, Malawi; Maputo, Mozambique; Windhoek, Namibia; Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Msunduzi, South Africa; Manzini, Swaziland; Lusaka, Zambia; and Harare, Zimbabwe).

The data collected supports the anecdotal evidence that urban poverty is associated with high levels of food insecurity at the household level. Across Southern Africa, the study confirmed that 77 percent of poor urban households reported conditions of food insecurity. Furthermore, the median household dietary diversity score is 5 out of 12, demonstrating that the majority of poor urban households are not ingesting a healthy variety of foods, and after removing sugar, sugary beverages, and oils, the score decreases to 2. Of those poor urban households surveyed, 81 percent had experienced an average of 4 months of inadequate access to food provisions during the preceding year. The majority of households confirmed that this situation was worse or much worse than last year. This empirical data proves that households across Southern Africa are experiencing pervasive food insecurity and action must be taken to alleviate this poverty.

From 10-12 June 2009, AFSUN partnering with the South African Cities Network (SACN) and the Municipal Development Partnership for Eastern and Southern Africa (MDP) hosted a conference – Urban Food Security in Southern Africa: Strategic Policy Dimensions – in Ekurhuleni City Council Chambers to understand and plan for food security in South and Southern Africa.

AFSUN was established in 2008 as a network of international and African universities, non-governmental organizations, and municipal networks advocating for food security policies and programmes in Africa. The organization aims to expand the knowledge base on urban food security in Africa; to build African human resources and capacity in food security policy and management; to help households make better decisions about food policy; and to develop and advocate for food security projects and programmes. AFSUN's first project, Urban Food Security and HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa is supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) based at the Southern African Research Centre (SARC) at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. The Programme in Urban Food Security (PUFS) at the University of Cape Town is the lead African institution.

At the conference, AFSUN presented this research to municipal officials and help develop policies to alleviate these dire conditions. The conference allowed academics, government officials from all spheres of government, and civil society to engage in issues of food insecurity. Workshop participants were encouraged to develop strategies for addressing these challenges.
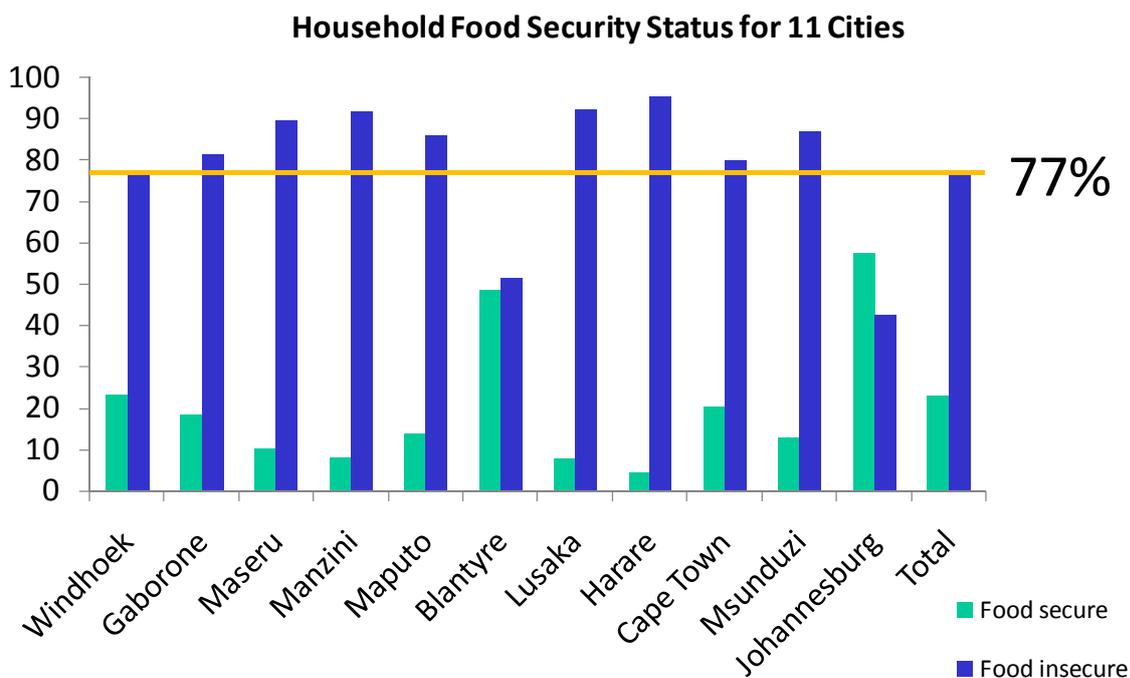

Fig. 1: Household Food Security Status for 11 Cities. Across Southern Africa, the study confirmed that 77 percent of poor urban households reported conditions of food insecurity. (All charts in this document are the product and property of AFSUN. For more information see Urban Food Security Baseline Survey, 2008. African Urban Food Security Network, Programme in Urban Food Security, University of Cape Town.)

Food security includes all aspects of production, procurement, distribution, and consumption of food by individuals, households in African towns and cities. Food shortages, rising food prices, and inflation all undermine the ability of people to secure an adequate daily supply of affordable, nutritious, hygienic, and culturally-appropriate food. Cities lose their competitiveness and

productivity within the global economy if they are not able to provide food security to residents. AFSUN's strategy is based on strengthening the rural-urban linkages to ensure adequate provisions for urbanites.

Conference proceedings opened Wednesday 10 June for evening welcome reception at the Ekurhuleni City Council Chambers. Participants were briefed on the importance of the issues to be discussed by various project partners. Sithole Mbanga, CEO of SACN opened the evening describing the environment under which the partnering organizations were coordinating to address the challenges of food insecurity in Africa. Following Mr. Mbanga, the Guest of Honour, the Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of the Anglican Church graced the room with the moral imperatives of actions to guarantee food security. His poignant remarks underscored the Church's commitment to ensuring food security for the needy. George Matovu, Regional Director of MDP provided the Keynote Address, in which he outlined MDP's decade of work to empower local governments. Among those initiatives, MDP has strived to enable individuals to support themselves. Professor Jonathan Crush, Co-Director of AFSUN at Queen's University closed the reception and set the scene for the important events of the following two days.
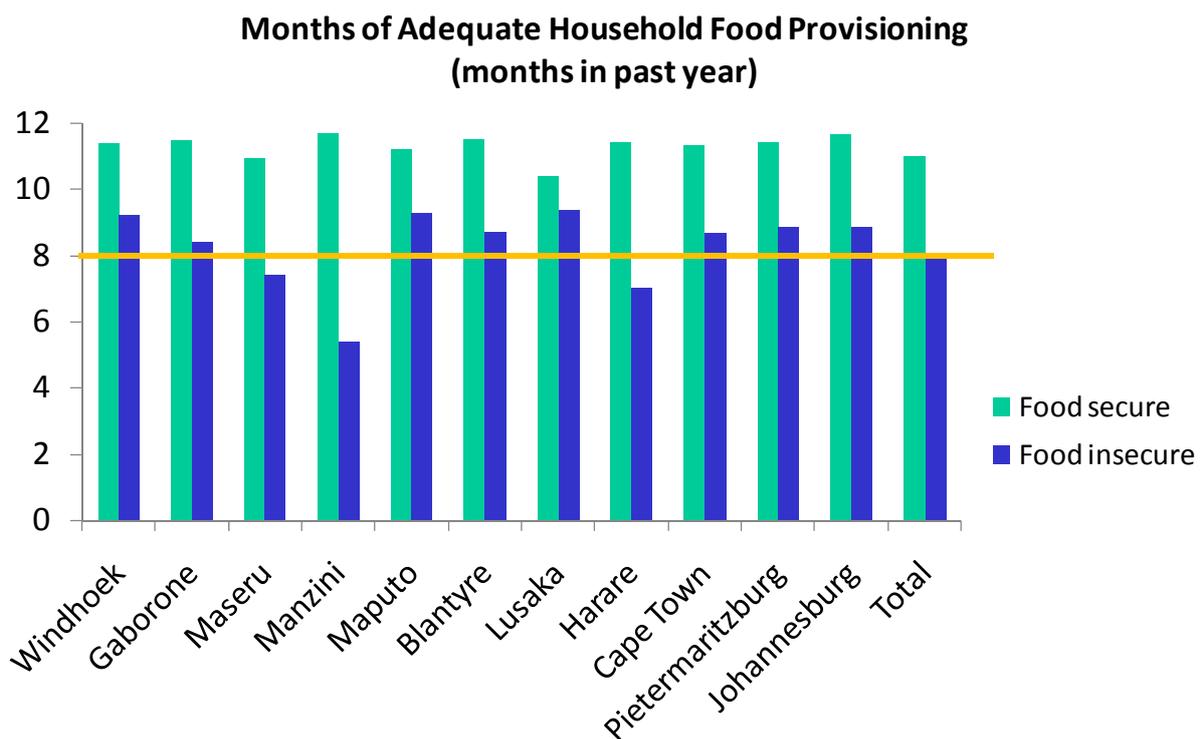

Fig. 2: Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning. Of those poor urban households surveyed, 81 percent had experienced an average of 4 months of inadequate access to food during the preceding year. The majority of households confirmed that this situation was worse or much worse than last year. (UFSBS, 2008)

The second day of the conference opened with an Introduction to AFSUN and the partnering organizations, SACN and MDP, followed immediately by a presentation of the key finding of the

AFSUN Urban Food Security Baseline Survey of the 11 SADC cities. Bruce Frayne, Director of the PUFS at UCT and Professor Wade Pendleton of UCT presented an overview of survey results. Gender is a key factor influencing urban household food insecurity. Data reveals that 35 percent of food insecure households were headed by females, by far the largest percentage, demonstrating a correlation between food insecurity and gender. Poverty is also a contributor; according to the Lived Poverty Index by Household Food Security Status 60 percent of food insecure households were also poor. Employment is also linked to food security; full-time employment significantly increases the likelihood of a household being food secure. When asked how these economic conditions compared to a year ago, 40 percent of food insecure survey respondents admitted that conditions were "much worse" than a year ago. 78 percent of respondents attributed rising food prices as a cause for going without food in the past 6 months. The survey also revealed that the majority of these food insecure households are going without food more than once a week.
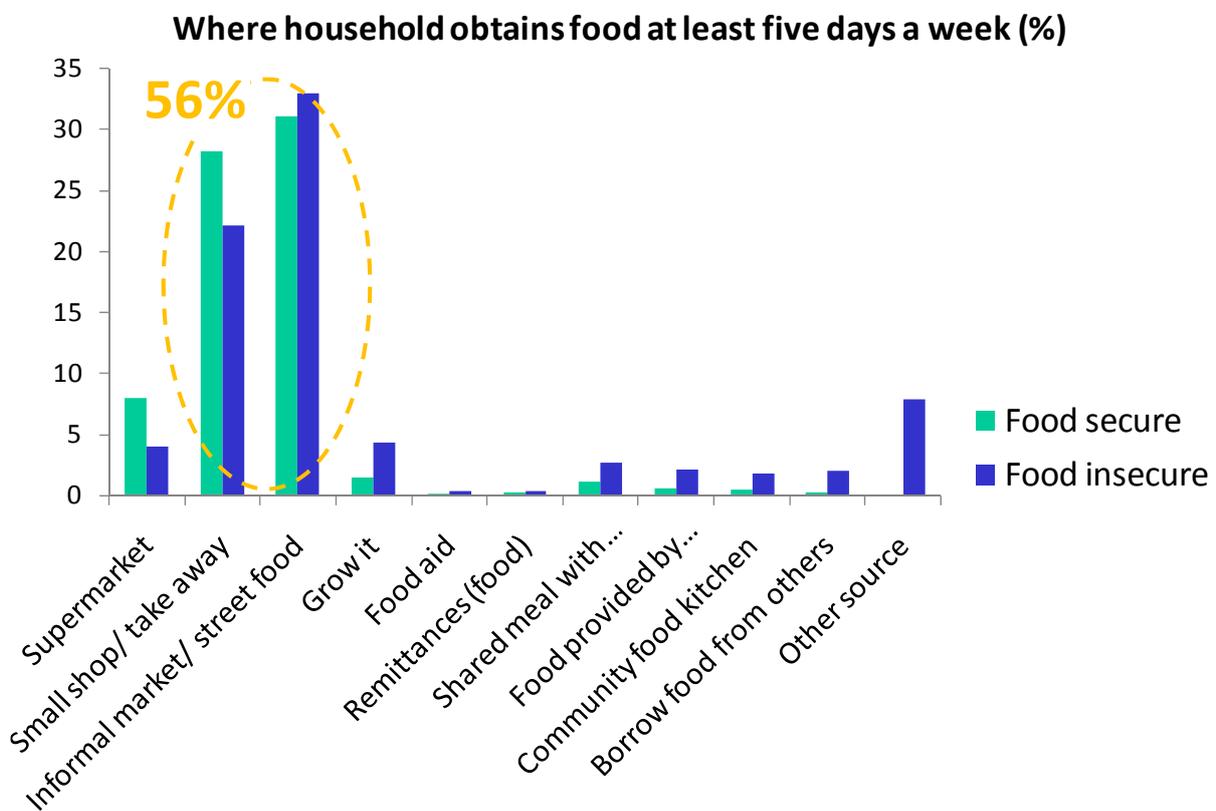

Fig. 3: Household Sources of Food. Of those poor urban households surveyed, 81 percent had experienced an average of 4 months of inadequate access to food provisions during the preceding year. The majority of households confirmed that this situation was worse or much worse than last year. (UFSBS, 2008)

Frayne and Pendleton also presented on the ways in which the urban poor ascertain their food. The survey revealed that 56 percent of food insecure households obtain food at least five times per week from either a small shop/take away or the informal market/street food, with only 4 percent

claiming that they grow it. Interestingly, across both food secure and insecure households, only 7 percent of total sample obtained food from urban agriculture, a number discussed later in a robust debate about the role of urban agriculture in poverty alleviation. Less than 5 percent of food insecure households acquire food from a supermarket, while, 28 percent received food transfers from rural areas. Growing food, food aid, remittances, sharing a meal, community food kitchens, borrowing food, and etc. are largely considered coping strategies. A question arose as to if people really have a choice as to where they obtain their food and if cities are providing adequate numbers of fresh produce markets with affordable prices in poor neighborhoods.

Contribution of Urban Agriculture as an Additional Livelihood Strategy (%)
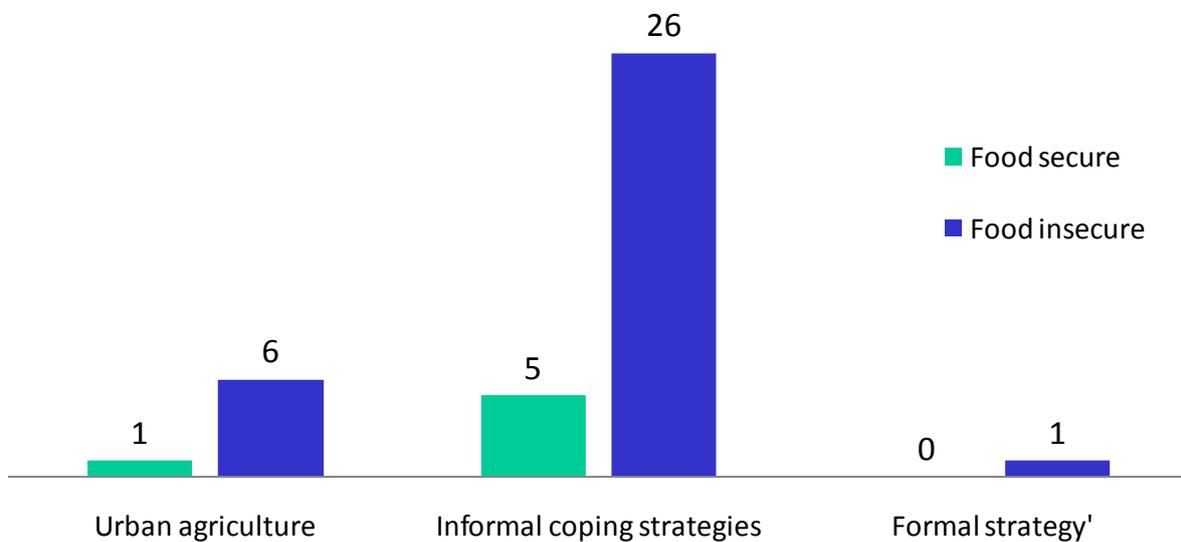

Fig. 4: Contribution of Urban Agriculture as an Additional Livelihood Strategy. Across both food secure and insecure households, only 7 percent of total sample obtained food from urban agriculture. (UFSBS, 2008)

Thursday's presentations continued as researchers presented various elements of the research conducted in their cities including, levels of food insecurity amongst poor urban households in Botswana, KwaZulu-Natal, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Gauteng, and Sources of Food Insecurity for Urban Households in Malawi, Lesotho, Johannesburg, and Cape Town.

Countries across the SADC region experience about four months of inadequate food. The worst months are January, February, and March. Data suggests that this situation is getting worse as seasonality impacts both production and distribution. Some countries like Zimbabwe and Malawi do not produce enough food while other countries like Namibia and South Africa have poor distribution networks limiting the availability of food. Insufficient rural farming, the availability of water and fertilizer, animal and plant diseases, and climate change were some of the reasons cited as causes for inadequate food production during these months. Countries that do not produce enough food rely on neighboring countries to sell them food, but individual households are often

unable to purchase these food imports. In this instance, economic conditions and unemployment are the primary factors causing food insecurity. Researchers cited January as one of the toughest months for the food insecurity because people tend to spend their money on the Christmas holidays leaving inadequate funds to purchase food in January and February.

So, what does all this mean for city officials?

Zola Dyasi, Project Executive in the Governance Department at eThekwini Municipality said, "Food security is a subset of poverty alleviation and we need to empower people to be able to sustain themselves rather than encourage a dependency on welfare and grants."

Food security is largely invisible from the political platform. Other urban problems, such as unemployment and housing take priority. Historically, cities have been built around access to food. Urbanization took place to ensure that everyone had sufficient food and while there are famines in rural areas, food insecurity is largely hidden in the cities. People mostly cope within their households and think strategically to meet the challenges of daily hunger. These ideas must be transformed. The right to food must be recognized as the basis for any policy. Food insecurity is the result of market failures and therefore government intervention is needed to readjust the market. Food security must be seen as a public good and necessary to ensure a safe, just, and productive city.

And that's what municipal officials did in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, a case study that demonstrates the possibilities when food security is prioritized in the modern city.

Belo Horizonte is a city in Brazil with a population of 2.5 million and over 5 million in the metropolitan area. In 2005, Belo Horizonte had gini Index of 0.61 and a high HDI of over 0.8. Poverty and hunger was pervasive in the city with an infant mortality rate of 35.3 in 1993. Many households were food insecure. To address these conditions, the city launched an ambitious multi-faceted programme that emphasized the needs of the hungry over housing and provided a voice to food insecure.

In 1993, a coalition government, headed by the Workers Party came to power and elected Mayor Patrus Anaias and addressed the challenges of food insecurity in the city. Firstly, Anaias created a municipal secretariat for food policy and supply to centralize and coordinate municipal food programmes. This dedicated body made food policy a priority and launched the following programmes:

1. Subsidized Food Sales. The government, in partnership with private entities opened four popular restaurants. These restaurants serve 20,000 meals per day to a variety of patrons, charging all diners the same price. Anybody can go in and eat a discounted meal. Professor Cecelia Rocha from Ryerson University in Canada, explains that this programme has been successful because people are not stigmatized as poor. Unlike food banks which have a negative stigma, popular restaurants serve everyone including families and students as well

homeless people and retired bank clerks, and everyone sits together in a cafeteria style room, thereby reducing the stigma of hunger and building community

2. Food and Nutrition Assistance. The government ensures that every student has enough to eat by providing the School Meal Programme which serves 40 million meals to 155,000 students in more than 200 public schools. The municipal government covers all the costs of infrastructure and personnel while the national government provides the food. The programme also supports local growers by purchasing food from local producers. This also guarantees that children are eating a healthy meal. The government, not civil society, also organizes a food bank in partnership with the municipal secretariat for urban sanitation. The food bank does not serve food but rather selects, cleans, and vacuum freezes perishable foods for distribution to charitable organizations and social service agencies (not individuals) for preparation of communal meals.

3. Supply and Regulation of Markets. The Abastecer/Worker's Convoy are commercial outlet shops licensed by the city, set up on city property, under an agreement with the city that sell between 20 and 25 items for one price (one price/kilogram for all items) set by the city at 20-50 percent below market prices. The secretariat monitors the quality and safety of all goods and ensures that the shops are serving low-income areas on weekends. The secretariat also has programmes to help rural families establish themselves in the countryside to halt the rural-urban migration. Countries stores selling food, crafts, and sweets, provide growers with an income to help them remain in the rural areas.

4. Support to Urban Agriculture. Urban agriculture is not the focus of the programme but it helps children understand the origins of their food and provides them with rural linkages.

5. Education for Food Consumption.

6. Job and Income Generation.

These programmes have been incredibly successful reducing hunger and poverty across the city. Professor Rocha explains, "The case of Belo Horizonte is an example of ways cities can address food security challenges. In order to make it work, a number of factors came together. Politically, there was political will; a strong mayor who prioritized urban food security and civil society working together with the government. The public was aware of the food security issues and in particular hunger and they were ready to accept a larger role for the government in addressing it. Also, the government could rely on knowledgeable leaders to develop the programmes."

A robust debate around the possibilities for urban agriculture followed a presentation by Professor Michael Rudolph from the University of Witwatersrand's presentation of the case study of the Siyakhana Food Garden Project (SFGP) in Johannesburg. The SFGP is an urban agriculture initiative that showcases an integrated food garden system of food production, education, research, and community empowerment. Professor Rudolph suggested the following key programmes to address food security:

1. Increase the access of food insecure communities to land, technology, and training
2. Support job creation through local food production enterprises
3. Invest in environmentally sustainable technologies for small-scale producers

4. Link women, youth, and gardeners to economic mainstream
5. Research establishes the value of nutrition and medicinal plant use in management of HIV/AIDS and opportunistic infections
6. Preferable to promote adequate nutrition through food-based approaches rather than through multivitamin supplementation
7. The promotion of sustainable urban agriculture represents one of the most direct and enduring strategies

Although the SFGP has many admirable attributes, its applicability towards addressing urban food security in other cities is unlikely given the extensive resources required to ensure the success of an urban garden as well as political, economic, and social challenges of an urban garden. In particular, the availability of land for farming versus the demand for housing in the South African context is difficult to balance. Any available space possibly used for urban agriculture will more likely be used for housing at the individual and the city level, as a poor household can earn more by renting the land to a shack and then purchasing food, than planting and harvesting on that land. On a larger scale, it is difficult for cities to leverage large pieces of land for agriculture when the demand for housing is so great. Likewise, there is a mindset that agriculture and an agrarian lifestyle is backward. Urban agriculture is seen as a mark of poverty and desperation, and therefore, the urban poor are not eager to engage in agriculture. The majority of the urban poor lives in dense neighborhoods and do not have land even for a small garden. Overall, urban gardens maintain a 95 percent failure rate. Finally, because food availability is not a key cause of food insecurity, urban agriculture will not be a major panacea for the food insecure. It is therefore imperative to maintain and improve food distribution networks and rural-urban linkages.

The need to strengthen rural-urban linkages was dominant throughout the conference, especially as participants challenged the possibilities of urban agriculture. In order to ensure food security for all, cities must support rural agriculture and ensure that food produced in rural areas is distributed to the urban poor. By protecting a rural agrarian lifestyle, cities are slowing the rate of urbanization and ensuring continued food production, ultimately reducing the number of food insecure living in the city.

In the final day of the conference, participants divided into groups to discuss policy decisions in greater detail. Groups were asked to explore "What role should social security play in addressing urban food security?", "How can livelihoods be supported to improve health and food security outcomes for vulnerable people?", "How can gender inequalities be address to improve the food security outcomes for vulnerable households?", and "What is the role of government (city, province, national) and civil society organization in promoting food security?"

The group exploring the role of government in addressing food security came up with an urban food security strategy for municipal government.

1. Need for capacity building (including research providing information) and education at all levels of government, civil society, and community;

2. Develop mechanisms to promote communication among actors to establish synergies, provide opportunities, for conflict resolution, and alignment of various policies, programmes, and projects; and develop a common language;
3. Define responsibilities and roles of all actors (including the different levels of government, civil society organizations, and private sector). For example, intervention policies for land reform and securing land availability, and for better market functions; balancing the need for emergency social welfare and long term social development to address poverty and food security;
4. Re-conceptualize and revalue food production in both urban and rural areas; such as by developing effective rural-urban (or city region) linkages; recognizing the multifunctional use of land and the potential of urban agriculture; and
5. Guarantee resources/financing to underpin all policies, strategies, programmes, and projects for food security; in particular, establish a budget for the mechanisms to enable communication and coordination.

It is a moral imperative for government to provide food to its people. Food security is a right based on 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as a legal requirement in the 1994 South African Constitution and it is therefore part of a government mandate to ensure that people have access to food. Currently, there is a lack of intersectional coordination and cooperation between spheres of government and civil society. Cites must develop mechanisms and institutions to facilitate dialogue, and provide funding and logistical support for the development of food policies. For any such initiatives to bear fruit, various institutions need to regulate around food security to adequately empower and resource any food policies and this requires political will.

SACN thanks to AFSUN, MDP, Ekurhuleni, and all the presenters and researchers.

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