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WOMEN AND URBAN FOOD INSECURITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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SUMMARY

- In Southern Africa, poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition are usually viewed as rural problems, with little focus on cities. The locus of poverty, however, is gradually shifting from rural to urban areas and is manifested in growing food insecurity.
- Southern Africa is urbanizing rapidly and more than half of the region's population is expected to live in cities and towns by 2025. Without appropriate policy intervention, urban food insecurity will likely rise.
- The poorest segments of the rural and urban population in Southern Africa are women and children. In the cities, poverty disproportionately affects female-headed households and makes them especially vulnerable to food insecurity.
- A better understanding of how female-headed households cope with urban food insecurity is needed to inform appropriate policy responses. Research should focus on how to integrate women into the urban economy so that they can generate an income that reflects the cost of living in an urban environment.

BACKGROUND

The first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) aims to halve the proportion of people affected by hunger and malnutrition by 2015, but in Southern Africa, this target is not likely to be achieved. Food insecurity has been growing rather than declining in the region, especially for women and children who are most vulnerable to decreasing agricultural productivity (African Development Bank, 2011; Mkandawire and Aguda, 2009; Adams, 2006).

While international organizations, donors and governments are focused on boosting smallholder food production for personal consumption, it is inadequate

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simply to focus on rural productivity as the sole cause of food insecurity. In Southern Africa, with one of the world's highest rates of urbanization, the fundamental problem is not one of food availability, but accessibility (UN-HABITAT, 2010). Poor women in urban areas often lack access to financial resources to purchase basic necessities, including food, which is needed to improve overall survival rates in line with MDG targets.

URBANIZATION AND FOOD INSECURITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Nearly 60 percent of the total population (some 250 million) in Southern Africa are now living in cities (State of African Cities, 2010). This figure is projected to pass 70 percent in the next 20 years and reach over 75 percent by mid-century (UN-HABITAT, 2010) with variations amongst South African countries. Rapid urban growth is the direct result of an expanding population and rural to urban migration (Crush, 2012).

Indirectly, however, the backdrop to urbanization is the legacy of colonial land and migration policy. During the long colonial period in the region, colonies separated the indigenous population from the settlers, ensuring the former could only visit towns on a temporary basis, often as contract migrants (Cooper, 1999). Indigenous populations were thus forced to live in marginal rural areas which became over-grazed, degraded and unsustainable environments. At independence, internal restrictions on mobility were abolished and impoverished rural populations began migrating to cities to find work in the formal and informal sectors.

Within the region, South Africa has the highest proportion of people living in urban areas (over 60 percent and counting), but across Southern Africa, urban growth rates are significantly higher than those in rural areas. Malawi's urban population, for example, is growing at over 5 percent/year, compared with less than 2 percent for the rural population. Urban areas in Angola, DR Congo, Lesotho, Mozambique and Tanzania are similarly fast growing at over 4 percent/year.

Rapid urbanization in Southern Africa, however, is not associated with increased incomes and better standards of living. In 2006, over 50 percent of the region's population was estimated to be living on \$1/day (all figures USD) and over 314 million people were classified as extremely poor (World

Bank, 2006). Moreover, research suggests the locus of poverty is shifting, with poverty rates in urban areas increasing faster than those in rural areas (Naylor and Falcon, 1995; Haddad et al., 1998; Ravallion et al., 2007). The depth of poverty in cities may be even more severe given that most development statistics are income-based and do not account for those who are impoverished in terms of inadequate housing, poor sanitation and food insecurity.

Food security challenges for Southern Africa's urban residents are also heightened by the effects of the 2007-08 global financial crisis, and rapid price increases in imported and locally produced foods (Cohen and Garrett, 2010; Ruel et al., 2010). These have combined with high unemployment (over 30 percent across the region) with Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia and Namibia recording unemployment rates of over 50 percent (Jauch, 2011).

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Since the 1970s, the plight of female-headed households has been recognized by academic researchers and development practitioners alike. This attention, however, has often focused on households and poverty in rural areas (Boserup, 1970; Buvinic, 1997; UN, 1995; Gawayana, 2008), and indeed suggest they are disadvantaged in terms of access to land, livestock, credit, health care, and extension services. In Zimbabwe, for example, female-headed rural households have 30 to 50 percent smaller land holdings than their male counterparts (IFAD, 1999).

In Southern Africa, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of female-headed urban households in recent years due to the declining dependency on long-term contract labour migrant earnings (Simelane, 2004). Similarly, traditional male labour migration to the urban areas of Southern Africa is now accompanied by a growing stream of independent female migrants (Dodson, 2000:143).

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG WOMEN IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Food security is commonly defined as “access by all people at all times to adequate, safe and nutritious food for a healthy and productive life” (FAO, 2006). In essence, the food security concept comprises three major elements: food availability, accessibility and utilization. Availability refers to the physical supply of food at the national or household level. The notion of food accessibility was popularized by Sen (1981) through his ‘entitlement’ theory that suggests food security involves more than sufficient production. The main source of food insecurity in most cities is lack of access, rather than availability. Urban dwellers have to pay for food in addition to housing, energy, transportation, education, health care and personal items, thus constraining the ability of an individual or household to purchase adequate food supplies.

Recent African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) research suggest there is chronic food insecurity in the urban centres of Southern Africa, where 77 percent of poor households were found to be food insecure (Frayne et al., 2010). The AFSUN survey further shows that female headed households were over represented (37 percent) among the food insecure category as compared to male headed households (12 percent), nuclear headed (31 percent) and extended households (20 percent) (Frayne et al., 2010:34).

Given that Southern Africa is rapidly urbanizing due to migratory patterns and natural population growth, a high proportion of existing and newfound urban dwellers will be vulnerable to food insecurity. With the rapidly-growing cities of the region already characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment and people living in informal settlements, access to basic services, income generation and food security are already major policy challenges facing governments in the region. The majority of households headed by women are particularly vulnerable in the situations and targeted urban food security policies (such as social protection, urban farming and small business development) are needed to minimize inequalities that impede greater development efforts.

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