

Frédéric Lançon

Urbanization and the effects on agriculture and food security

Historically, urbanization has been associated with the consumption side of the food system, while rural areas have been viewed as the suppliers of food products. Urban and rural areas have also traditionally been seen as competitors for the allocation of human resources (labour) and natural resources (land, water).

In terms of food security, this spatial dichotomy was emphasized by a rapid growth of the urban population in low-income countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan regions. This generated a recurrent food dependency of low-income countries on the international food trade. The globalization process of the food systems during the late nineties and early two thousands, including the upgrading and expansion of global food value chains (“the supermarket revolution”) can be seen as the materialization of this food dependency. The 2008 food price surge demonstrated the inherent social and political risks (“i.e. hunger riots”) of food market globalization, which in turn triggered the need for a change of the “globalization narrative” and the food policy agenda.

The formulation of a new narrative to understand how urbanization processes interplay with food security requires us to critically review the conventional analytical ‘rural area versus city’ framework in relation to how food systems function.

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Deeper analysis suggest that food systems are not structured along a supposed rural-urban divide, but on the contrary include interactions that are far more complex. Urban diets include a wide range of imported and locally produced food and meals, often consumed outside the home for convenience. The share of imported food in urban consumer’s diets is not necessarily determined by income level. Poor consumers can purchase imported or industrial processed food, while better off urbanites can also consume traditional dishes made from local product.

In relation to the urbanization process, at the global scale, since 2006 more than 50 % of the world’s population now live in urban areas, however this percentage remains lower in poorer countries. For instance, in low-income food deficit countries, only 33% of the population is urban, underlining the point that the urbanization rate is not the only determinant of food dependency. It also shows

that the urban transition is far from complete in poorer countries and that the pressure from urban food demand on both rural supply and import will further expand in the coming decade.

Regarding competition between rural and urban areas for labour, it should also be emphasized that migration is no longer the major driver of the urbanization process. Urbanization is mostly fueled by natural urban population growth (i.e. most urbanites are born in cities). Conversely, rural-urban migration does not

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lead to a decline of rural populations; in sub-Saharan Africa, rural populations will continue to increase until the middle of the century.

An on-going rural population increase will result in both higher requirements in rural employment (which can be generated by food production), and in additional food demands within these rural areas. Another counterintuitive dimension of the food system in a rural-urban perspective is that a high share of rural food consumption is purchased from food markets and not produced and consumed within the household. In West Africa Expenditure and Consumption surveys indicate that on average 50% of staples (cereals and tubers) consumed in rural areas are purchased, the share is even higher for meat products (75%).

Urban food supply combines a number of food chains that source food either from imports or from the rural hinterland. While imported food chains are often governed by large scale corporations using formal retailing networks (supermarkets), local food chains rely on smaller scale trading and labor-intensive processing entities that are often informal. Small scale informal trade and food street vendors play a key role in mitigating “food deserts” in fast growing marginal and poor urban areas where formal food retailing networks are absent. This ensures better access to the food supply for vulnerable populations.

Local food chains play a strategic role in linking rural areas to urban consumers, ensuring job opportunities along the whole chain. The densification of rural areas support the emergence of secondary urban centers which also, in turn, play a critical role in the organization of the local food chain hubs through the provision of services to traders and processors.

At the global level, the urbanization process is clearly marked by the increasing share of large cities; in 1950 60% of the urban population were living in cities with less than 300 000 inhabitants, in 2020 this share declined to 40%, while 13% of urbanites are now living in megapolis of more than 10 million inhabitants. However, in low income countries, the urban population living in smaller cities still represent 50 % of the total urban population. In Sub-Saharan Africa in 2000, 100 million urbanites lived in cities with less than 300 000 habitants, by 2020 this figure had increased to 218 million. Food chain intermediaries, often based

in these smaller urban centres, contribute to the transformation of agriculture through investment in production (investment in land, technical innovation) in order to adapt their food sourcing to their client requirements.

In conclusion, urbanization processes are not a constraint for strengthening food security but rather a source of agricultural transformation and dynamism that support food production.

References

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Frédéric Lançon is an economist at CIRAD (Agricultural Research Centre for International Development) investigating how local food value chains supplying urban markets in less developed countries can compete within the globalization process of food systems. Frédéric has carried out extensive research and numerous consultancies, in partnership with national authorities and international development institutions in West Africa and South-East Asia, on a variety of food chain processes, particularly on rice.