

PRESENTATION SNAPSHOT

From “informal” to “local”: The role of data in legitimizing and supporting the local food economy in Malawi



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Presentation Abstract

Local and regional food economies throughout Africa are critical to rural and urban food security and are common sources of income for men and women. Despite their importance, local agrifood systems are often described as “informal,” a framing that obscures their value and implies chaos, inefficiency, and backwardness. Consequently, the importance of local food economies in relation to food security and livelihood is largely unexplored.

As critical nodes in regional food networks that link rural producers to city residents, urban retail markets offer important opportunities for legitimizing and strengthening regional food systems. Better understanding these markets through research is key to developing policies and interventions that address urban factors of food insecurity, such as the condition of infrastructure, municipal policies that govern the use of space, and consumer proximity to markets. This type of research can also inform how local and regional agrifood networks, institutions, and practices can be strengthened in the service of local agrifood economies in both rural and urban contexts.

Our presentation and paper highlight significant findings from a collaborative research project conducted by Michigan State University and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, the goal of

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which is to better describe and understand urban food exchange in Lilongwe, particularly in relation to sustainable livelihoods and food security. Findings from this work should inform municipal planning processes and other efforts to address urban food insecurity in Lilongwe.

Keywords: City-Region Food Systems, Malawi, Lilongwe, Informality, Food Exchange, Retail Markets

Key Points

- Analytical and conceptual frames affect how we understand reality and how we decide to enact change. In this presentation, which concerns the local food economy in Malawi, we make the case that predominating conceptual and analytical frames obscure empirical realities. We suggest that alternative frames, more attuned to and reflective of the realities of place, are more likely to result in analyses and findings that serve social and ecological wellbeing. Moreover, place, as an organizing principal, frees up analyses to recognize the emergent properties of local food systems; in Malawi, for example, a key dimension of the local system is its fluidity and flexibility, which are likely factors contributing to its adaptive capacity.
- Prevailing framing of agrifood system change in Africa is referred to as “food systems transformation.” This framing says that rising incomes plus rapid urbanization drive changes that signal “modernization” is imminent. “Modernization” is conflated with the kinds of food systems that prevail in western countries. Policy prescriptions tend to call for responses that will expedite this kind of transformation.
- We assert that *a priori*, universal assumptions about where the food system is headed remove the impetus to study where the food system is presently, as well as place-based challenges, opportunities, and goals. Food systems referred to as “traditional” or “informal” often have their value dismissed because in the prevailing linear framing, it is assumed they will disappear. Yet, these local food systems reveal much about the challenges people face and why and how the system works in relation to place-based realities.
- Going forward, food systems studies in Africa should aim to expose theoretical weakness of prevailing conceptual frames, demonstrate the ways in which prevailing policy prescriptions are political, draw attention to the ideological assumptions that underlie market-oriented policy prescriptions, insist on empiricism, and recognize other forms of knowledge production and ways of being. Our work has shown that interdisciplinary, multistakeholder processes can accommodate and reconcile a wide range of experience, and are thus more reflective of democratic city development.

Conclusion

Our presentation proposes a frame based on scholarship from African urbanists AbdouMalik Simone and Edgar Pieterse that encourages place-based analyses of food systems that can grapple with particular social, economic, political, and environmental realities in a place, as well as highlight how they are important to livelihood and other kinds of human wellbeing. In lieu of the full paper, we refer the reader to two research briefs: *Urban Food Security in Lilongwe, Malawi*¹ and *Regional Supply Chains and the Food Economy of Malawi*.²

Resources

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¹ https://gcfsi.isp.msu.edu/files/4115/2356/2426/Final-Urban_Food_Security_ResearchBrief.pdf

² https://gcfsi.isp.msu.edu/files/5615/0842/7543/Regional-Supply-Chain-Malawi-Food-Economy_Oct2017_GCFsIResearch-Brief.pdf