



## IN THEIR VOICES

### Lived experiences with food insecurity among the urban poor

This policy brief outlines findings and policy implications of a Wellcome Trust-funded public engagement project, 'The Right to Food Project', implemented by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC).

#### Key messages

- The right to food is a universal, inalienable human right enshrined in the Kenyan Constitution. However, it is not actualized for many urban poor in Nairobi as many grapple with severe challenges in accessing adequate, safe and quality food as a result of chronic and pervasive poverty. Over 4 in 5 households are food insecure, close to half of children under five years are chronically undernourished, and about a third of women of reproductive age are underweight.
- Kenya may not achieve her targets for vision 2030 or the sustainable development goals of ending hunger, enhancing food security and reducing malnutrition if targeted actions, recognizing the special vulnerabilities of the urban poor are not put into place.
- Targeted policies, strategies and programs by the government and other relevant players are key steps needed to ensure lasting progress in actualizing the right to food for the urban poor. The Big 4 Agenda with respect to food security primarily focuses on food production. For the urban poor, food access and food safety are the key concerns. Measures to address food insecurity for the urban poor should include economic empowerment and improvement of food safety through improving environmental sanitation

#### Introduction

Food security exists when “*all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life*” (FAO 2008). This definition introduces four main dimensions of food security: physical **availability** of sufficient food of appropriate quality; economic and physical **access** to food, influenced by market factors, the price of food, and individual purchasing power; food **utilization** determined by general hygiene and sanitation, water quality, and food safety; and **stability** to ensure that the first three dimensions are not affected negatively by sudden natural, economic or political shocks over time.

In Kenya, emerging evidence strongly indicates that those in urban areas are experiencing the impacts of food insecurity most acutely. One in every three Kenyans still faces severe food insecurity and poor nutrition, and this is especially so among the urban poor. Due to high levels of poverty in urban informal settlements, there is over-reliance on purchased food. As a result, many urban slum residents spend over half of their daily income on food (Amendah et al. 2014), with over 80% of households being food insecure (Kimani-Murage et al. 2014). Consequently, high levels of malnutrition have been reported, with nearly half the number of children under five years old being stunted (too short for



African Population and Health Research Center



RIGHT TO FOOD



their age), and close to a third of women of reproductive age being underweight (Kimani-Murage et al. 2016).

These are worrying statistics, especially since the right of all people to freedom from hunger, and adequate food of acceptable quality is enshrined in the 2010 Constitution of Kenya. Conversations and action on food security in the country are, albeit with the best of intentions, often centered on improving food production through increased yields and outputs. Yet, there is less detailed focus on who is accessing the food and on the specific ways in which their access to food is often limited by inherent social, economic and political factors. The challenge is even more pronounced for Kenya's urban poor who have less power and voice within these systems and often cannot access food even when it is available. In particular, the perceived disconnect between the government and citizens signals the importance of re-engaging the urban poor to clarify experiences, challenges and desired outcomes on their right to food. This serves to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented in decision making

processes, but also adds a layer of analysis that often can be missed by key players and other actors in the food security sector.

Against this backdrop, APHRC undertook the implementation of a Wellcome Trust funded project on Public Engagement on the Right to Food. The key objective was to stimulate dialogue on the concept and food security and the right to food and understand the nexus between the right to food and the day to day experiences with food insecurity among urban poor populations in Nairobi as evidenced by research. In addition, the project aimed to empower the community members to communicate their experiences with food insecurity in ways most relevant to them, thereby enhancing their ability to shape solutions to challenges affecting them. The project outputs presented in this policy brief are intended to guide government at national and county levels and non-state actors to formulate and implement law, policies, strategies and programs in ways that best address food security issues for the urban poor.

## The Public Engagement Approach



In 2018 APHRC undertook public engagement activities in ten (10) informal settlements across Nairobi. We worked with community organized groups (COGs) working in the target slums to engage their respective communities. The engagement used a combination of innovative participatory methodologies such as photovoice,

digital stories, community dialogues, radio talk shows, participatory geographic information systems (PGIS), graffiti and wall murals, participatory theatre, human library among others, as well as qualitative methods such as focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

## Key Findings

The lived experiences with food insecurity for Nairobi's urban poor are partly shaped by and must first be understood in relation to their perception (or not) of food as a right, their perception on the channels for actualization of the right to food, and their perception on whom the responsibility lies with. Contrary to awareness on other rights provided for in Kenya's Constitution such as the right to freedom of speech, few of the urban poor community members that we engaged were aware of their right to food. Some

of the leaders engaged in the project admitted to having heard of the right to food although they understood little of what this right entailed. The Project's public engagement activities however served to raise awareness on the right to food and created a sense of empowerment among community participants and leaders alike.

Findings in this section are organized according to four themes which form the pillars of food security

### I. Food availability

We heard from community members that food is generally available in plenty in urban poor markets and streets, and range from fruits, vegetables and cooked street foods.



### II. Food access

Incidentally, the widespread availability of food in urban markets masks a less positive picture at household level. Food available in the markets rarely translates to food being available in urban poor households, and for many

families there is little or no food available to feed everyone to satisfaction. Key impediments to food access for the urban poor arise mainly with regard to financial, physical and social factors.

### Financial access challenge

Economic access (where a household purchases food produced elsewhere) presents the main challenge to food security for the urban poor. Many either lack or have low paying income earning opportunities that weakens their purchasing power. For example, although poor settings

have a wide variety of foods with some selling as low as KES 10 (\$0.1), we heard that many urban poor residents are unable to afford this. Those who actually benefit the most from these cheap foods are neighbors in surrounding lower-middle income estates.



*“There is plenty of food in our markets. The problem is the money to buy it...”*

*(Youth, Mukuru Kwa Njenga, Nairobi)*

*Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Mukuru-Kwa Njenga/2018*



*“Our children need certain food items because of their special needs. This photo shows that these types of food are available but if you have money, you cannot afford to get your children good healthy food”.*

*Mothers- Viwandani, Nairobi*

*Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Kibera/2018*

### Physical access challenge

Most markets and street food sources are located in areas that are quite accessible to urban poor residents. There are however vulnerable groups within these communities such as the sick, older people and people living with

disability whose physical access to food is greatly limited. We frequently heard that these vulnerable groups suffer in the quest to access food from the markets and have to rely on others for assistance.



*“I starve a lot because as you can see my legs, I cannot walk around. It’s easier to ask for help when you can walk. Currently I sit and wait for good Samaritans to come through for me. When I get money I ask people to do errands for me...I sleep hungry and without drinking water not due to lack of money but because of my limited movement”.*

*Older women- Korogocho, Nairobi*

*Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Korogocho/2018*

### Social access challenges

In addition to economic and physical access, social access factors also influences food access for the urban poor. Other than cultural beliefs on food and perceived gender roles that restrict the kinds of foods that people can access, time constraints play a key role in limiting

access to quality food. Most urban poor residents work as casual laborers operating on very early and very late hours. This limits time for food preparation at home hence opting for ready street foods.



*“Due to lack of time, mothers leave their children with 10 shillings so they can buy chips for lunch. When you about the time you will spend making food at lunch time, you would rather be working and make food once during supper. Chips is not healthy but it is a solution to making sure that the children do not stay hungry”*

Mothers- Korogocho, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Korogocho/2018

Ironically, while many urban poor go hungry or settle for less food owing to the foregoing challenges, **food wastage** in surrounding markets is commonplace.



*There are times when you find that that market has food in plenty and there are times when the vendors throw away food because it is going bad...*

Youth- Dandora, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Dandora/2018

## III. Food utilization

Due to poverty and weak purchasing power earlier alluded to, many urban poor residents can only afford food of low quality and poor standards.

### Food quality

We heard that at the larger wholesale markets, traders who sell to the high and middle income areas pick the best quality foodstuffs as residents of such areas are able to afford it at a higher cost. On the other hand, traders who sell food to urban poor consumers select low quality food products that they are able to sell at a relatively lower price affordable to the local customer base. The low

quality foods include overripe fruits, vegetables that are almost going stale, damaged food products, expired or almost expired food products and rejects. Not surprisingly, the consumption of balance diets and variety of foods is not a priority in urban poor households and is commonly practiced. Most families instead

resort to eating for the sake of sustaining life rather than for the nutritional value of food. This reflects the high prevalence of hunger and malnutrition among urban poor households in Nairobi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> High levels of malnutrition have been reported with nearly half the number of children under five years old being stunted (too short for their age), and close to a third of women of reproductive age being underweight (Kimani Murage et al. 2016)



*“Vendors go to the market and bring these parts of the fish, after the fillet has been removed the bones is what he brings. They are dried in the open air on an open metallic bed. If you want to flavor your food and you cannot afford fish, this is what you buy and make soup to flavor your food. It is unhygienic and full of flies”*

Youth- Kibera, Nairobi

*Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Kibera/2018*



*“Many children are left at home without food or just a cup of porridge for the whole day. It is not a surprise to find young children taking care of their siblings as their parents, mostly mothers, go out to look for money to sustain the family. Malnutrition among children is very high in the slum”*

Mothers- Mukuru Kwa Ruben, Nairobi

*Photo credit: Photovoice participant- Mukuru-Ruben/2018*

### Food safety

Poor sanitation and unhygienic environment is common place in urban poor settings in Nairobi as most areas are characterized by poor drainage systems, poor waste management systems and congestion. Open or leaking

sewers are a major concern for access to clean and safe water for drinking and food preparation. Food is prepared and sold in this kind of environment, increasing chances of frequent contamination.



*“This situation is not unique in the slum where you find food being sold near a sewer that has burst. The sewages here are always bursting and the vendors continue selling their food near them without knowing that it contaminates the food they are selling”*

Man- Mukuru Kwa Ruben, Nairobi

*Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Mukuru-Ruben/2018*

Some urban poor residents also grow vegetables along sewer lines and polluted river banks using raw sewage sludge to irrigate and fertilize their farms.



*"...the river is always overflowing with sewer water and garbage. This is the same water that is used to irrigate vegetables that are either eaten at home or sold to customers in the communities"*

Adults- Mukuru Kwa Ruben, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant- Mukuru-Ruben/2018

We also heard that hygiene is a major concern as vendors who lack proper structures display their food products on dusty ground or on top of open sewers.



*"To be able to get clients, some vendors set up shop by the road, this means that the food is easily contaminated, since they cannot set up a stall by the road, they place their produce on the ground"*

Mothers- Korogocho, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant- Korogocho/2018

#### IV. Food stability

Two key factors emerged as influencing food stability among the urban poor. First, on the part of consumers by way of earlier mentioned economic challenges such as, unemployment and low income statuses that affect regular

access to adequate food. Second, on the part of vendors by way of rising food prices which makes it unprofitable to sustain trade in food.



*"Our main problem is lack of employment, if someone had money they will most definitely get good healthy food. Most times you will find people going to hustle, they don't make any money and so they stay hungry. Take this man for example, because it is lunchtime, he is taking a break by taking a nap instead of eating because he doesn't have money to afford food"*

Youth- Korogocho, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant- Korogocho/2018



*“When the cost of food goes up, a lot of vendors end up closing shop because the cost of buying the items to sell is something they cannot sustain. Food business in the slum especially for those who have to pay rent for their shop can be unmanageable at times”*

Youth- Korogocho, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Korogocho/2018

## Coping Strategies

With the foregoing challenges to food security particularly in terms of food access and food utilization, many urban poor are inclined to resort to coping strategies for survival. These strategies often take the form of financial compromise and/or food compromise. For many urban poor, financial compromise coping strategies typically involve engaging in risky social practices such as

prostitution, crime and child labor as means of obtaining food. Others resort to food compromise which includes reducing meal frequency and dietary intake, relying on donations from well-wishers, scavenging for food in dump-sites, or purchasing low quality foods. Together, these coping strategies intensify the susceptibility of urban poor residents to poor nutritional and health outcomes

### Financial compromise as a coping strategy

#### Begging

It was widely reported that some urban poor residents' particularly older people, people living with disability, the sick, and small children depend on good Samaritans to give them something to eat. Some camp at places with

high human traffic like the roadsides or at the entrance of an institution while others move around asking for money and food.



*“I started off as a street urchin. I would go to scavenging from the dumpsite to get food but due to old age and my swollen legs I can no longer do it. I resorted to begging on the streets where I get mistreated at times I lack enough to provide food for myself and most of the time I sleep hungry*

Older woman, Korogocho, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Korogocho/2018

#### Borrowing

Borrowing was also reported and takes many forms. There are those who buy food items from vendors on credit. To achieve this one has to create a good rapport with the trader and have a good record of credit worthiness to sustain this kind of relationship. Customer loyalty was

mentioned as one of the reasons why some would keep buying low quality or unhygienic products from a trader in an environment where there was another vendor with better options at the same cost.

*“...you have to be well known to the person from whom you're going to buy and you make friends so that if tomorrow you lack money, they will allow you to borrow. It's not that today you buy from here, then when you have money you go to the other person, then when you don't have you come back to this person, this would cause problems...”*

Photovoice, Woman, Viwandani, Nairobi

### Stealing

Faced with frequent hunger and uncertainty over the next meal, it was reported that the youth in particular, resort to criminal activities as a source of income. Some end up mugging, vandalizing houses and shops or even advance

to hard core armed robbery. Therefore food insecurity to some extent explains the high rates of crime and insecurity in poor urban settings. Involvement in crime endangers the lives of youth as the end result is usually fatal.

*"...you don't want to see your smaller siblings suffering, you will have to fend for them to eat, and you will have to steal. When you steal you will be burnt or be shot..."*

FGD, Youth, Dandora, Nairobi

### Prostitution

Some women and girls resort to 'sex-for-money' to obtain food for themselves and/or their families. Prostitution has also spread to married couples where the male or female

partner engages in commercial sex with or without the consent, knowledge and support of the spouse.

*"...I have a neighbor who has a husband, the husband escorts her to the streets as her security, watching over her as she does street prostitution to get money so that they get food to give the children because the husband does not have a job and the wife does not have a job too. So they have to look for a way out for the children to get food..."*

FGD, adults, Korogocho, Nairobi

### Child labor

We heard that a common practice among urban poor parents is to send their under age children to work so as

to increase household income and supplement the little food available at home.

*"...you get a small child like one in class 7 pushing a cart with water to at least get something he can put in the stomach. You'll find that they do those hard tasks that they ought not to do just because of that hunger"*

FGD, adults, Mathare, Nairobi

## Food compromisation as a coping strategy

### Scavenging

Pushed to the brink by hunger, some urban poor residents scavenge for food at dumpsites and places with throwaway food wastes. Some residents in Dandora commonly rely on the Dandora dumpsite for their daily meals and told first

hand stories of how they were brought up on meals from the site. Children also commonly scout the sites in search of food to eat.



*"Left-over food from the aeroplanes is one of the major sources of food collected from the dumpsite. This food is sometimes still packed but what makes it unsafe is that it is mixed up with all the other waste. People still pick it up and sell it and sometimes you will find things like needles in there. Others entirely depend on the dumpsite for their daily food, which is not fit for human consumption"*

Youth, Dandora, Nairobi

Photo credit: Photovoice participant-Dandora/2018

### *Consumption of poor quality cheap food*

We heard that some urban poor residents have no option but to go for the cheapest available food turning a blind eye to the quality, safety and hygiene of the food. The first goal is to fill the stomach and in quantities shareable with

the entire household. This could explain why the market for low standard, expired, poorly handled and unsafe food thrives in urban poor settings.

*".....When it comes to food, you just go and buy the cheap food without considering how that food will help your body. Therefore, you just eat to get satisfied..."*

FGD, older adults, Kibera, Nairobi

*"...When you go to most hotels (food kiosks) you find poor quality meat. That is what is cooked with these tomatoes called "bondeka" (spoiled/squashed tomatoes), and people eat because they don't have money to go to a hotel (food kiosk) that cooks clean food that is why we get illnesses..."*

FGD, youth, Mathare, Nairobi

---

### *Skipping meals*

Perpetuated by poverty, many urban poor residents also opt to eat just a single meal in a day to save for the subsequent days. For many such individuals and families, supper is the most important meal, the rest are skipped

*"... Many families eat one meal. By the way if you eat two meals in your house you are rich. So many people just eat supper..."*

FGD, Youth, Mukuru Kwa Reuben, Nairobi

---

## Conclusions and recommendations

An important goal of the right to food project was to engage community members in highlighting the reality of their experiences and circumstances with food insecurity. Chronic and pervasive poverty emerged as the main cause of food access and utilization problems for urban poor residents. This points to the need for further improvements on sustainable access to and utilization of food through renewed efforts by the government, civil society and other relevant players. In addition, more detailed and in-depth participatory approaches will be one of the key tools to further empower the community to speak out and increase capacities to develop responsive local strategies and interventions and enhance the right to food for the urban

poor in Nairobi. Further, there is need to invest in progressive solutions that are people- centered, and that take into account the specific experiences, needs and concerns of the urban poor in relation to food security. These solutions include devising and implementing laws, policies and programs that address expressed vulnerabilities to food insecurity of the urban poor, economic empowerment especially focusing on the youth to promote food security of the urban poor, food safety enhancement measures especially among the food vendors, and support for local innovative food production to ensure household food security for the most vulnerable.

## References

- Amendah D.D., Buigut S., and Mohamed S. (2014), "Coping Strategies among Urban Poor: Evidence from Nairobi, Kenya," PLoS One, vol. 9, no. 1, p. e83428.
- The Food and Agriculture Organization (2008), "An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security," Global Hunger Index
- The Food and Agriculture Organization (2018). The 2018 Global Hunger Index Results - Global, Regional, and National Trends - Global Hunger Index - peer-reviewed
- annual publication designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger at the global, regional, and country levels. Available: <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/results/>
- Kimani-Murage E.W, et al (2014). "Vulnerability to food insecurity in urban slums: experiences from Nairobi, Kenya," J. Urban Heal., vol. 91, no. 6, pp. 1098–1113.
- Kimani-Murage EW, Muthuri SK, Oti SO, Mutua MK, van de Vijver S, and Kyobutungi (2015), "Evidence of a Double Burden of Malnutrition in Urban Poor Settings in Nairobi, Kenya," PLoS One, vol. 10, no. 6.

---

## Contributors

- Dr. Elizabeth Kimani-Murage, Senior Research Scientist, APHRC; Wellcome Trust International Engagement Fellow; and, Lead Right to Food Project
- Ms. Hilda Owii, Research Officer, Maternal and Child Wellbeing Unit, APHRC
- Mr. David Osogo, Research Officer, Maternal and Child Wellbeing Unit, APHRC
- Ms. Florence Sipalla, Communication Manager| Policy Engagement and Communications, APHRC
- Ms. Michelle Mbuthia, Communications Officer| Synergy, APHRC

## **“Article 43(1)C of the Kenyan Constitution safeguards the Right to Food”**

### **About the African Population and Health Research Center**

The African Population and Health Research Center is the continent’s premier research institution and think tank, generating evidence to drive policy action to improve the health and wellbeing of African people.

### **Contact details**

Tel: +254733410102/0722205933

Fax: + 254 (20) 400 1101

Email: [info@aphrc.org](mailto:info@aphrc.org)

Dr. Elizabeth Kimani-Murage: [ekimani@aphrc.org](mailto:ekimani@aphrc.org)

APHRC website: <http://aphrc.org/>

The Right to Food Project website: <http://aphrc.org/right2food/>

### **Acknowledgements**

The Right to Food Project appreciates the funding support of the Wellcome Trust, and the Route to Food Initiative

*Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material from the Right to Food Project Policy Brief in their own publications. In return, the Right to Food Project requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication.*