

## Joining forces against the urbanisation of hunger



In the future, urbanisation will mainly take place in the Global South, especially in Asia and Africa. With a projected 2 billion people living in slum by 2030, what can city or national governments in the North do to help alleviate global urban food poverty?

In an article published in 2017 and called *Food (In)Security in Rapidly Urbanising, Low-Income Contexts*, Cecilia Tacoli, from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) (UK), reviews existing scientific literature on what she calls the “urbanisation of hunger”. She unveils the interplay between income and non-income dimensions of urban food poverty, and calls for actual participation and empowerment of the urban poor. Interestingly, such an analysis recalls those developed in the global North around food justice. As such, it opens very stimulating insights for city cooperation.

### People’s income is at the centre of urban food insecurity...

Income (or the lack of) is at the centre of urban food insecurity. Indeed, in cities, the main way to access food is by purchasing it. For instance, a study found that some households in the Mathare slum in Nairobi (Kenya) spend as much as half of their income on food.

**Low income not only restricts one’s ability to buy food. It is also correlated with having to pay more to access lower quality goods and services.** This is what researchers call the “poverty penalty”. For instance, supermarkets are usually less expensive than smaller shops, but they are usually not located in slums. Another example? Fruit and vegetables are also more expensive in slums, leaving people with less healthy options.

For this reason, according to Cecilia Tacoli, **“food has to be dealt with as a poverty issue”**. Such an analysis echoes discussions in the Global North about food justice ([see our previous paper on the topic](#)).

### ... but a lot of other aspects matter too

What Cecilia Tacoli shows in her article, though, is that urban food insecurity also has other dimensions. One could name, for instance:

- **Bad housing conditions**, that lead to lack of storage and cooking space, or of a refrigerator that would prevent the food from going bad.
- **Insecurity of tenure**, as a stable address is usually a prerequisite to accessing relief programs.
- **Gender inequality**. Indeed, women are often more affected by food insecurity, as they are usually the last ones to eat.



- **Lack of good quality, affordable, basic services.**
- **Lack of time.**

These dimensions are closely related to income issues. For instance, because they usually have little storing space, low income households tend to buy small quantities on a daily basis instead of bulk purchases once in a while, which would be less expensive. Actions should therefore tackle the interplay of income and non-income dimensions of urban food poverty.

### **One advice? Strengthen people's initiatives!**

With urbanisation booming and climate change looming, the future does not look bright. Given the scale of the problem, the researcher calls for a structural change in how we deal with urban food poverty. The principle underpinning such a change is participation. Not of the kind we are used to, that is, by organising events and hoping people will turn up. They won't. Poor people do not have the time. Instead, **participation should aim at strengthening people's initiatives.**

According to Cecilia Tacoli, *"poor people need to be given room to innovate within their own neighbourhoods"*. Indeed, when grassroots organisations work with local authorities to produce their own solutions, they tend to be more successful. A good example of that is the [Orangi Pilot Project](#) in Pakistan. The organisation has been working since 1980 to promote community organisation and self-management in the provision of basic services. How? By researching drain design to make it more affordable and easier for local people to install, and by training them to do so. In other words, by helping people to act instead of acting for them. Such a strategy focusing on empowerment ended up being less expensive than conventional ways of providing sanitation infrastructure.

**Fostering participation means finding new ways to make people participate in decision-making.** And depart from top-down participation arenas where they feel as outsiders. One should look at where people – and especially the poorest – are, and what collective action they choose to dedicate the little time they have to. For instance, Cecilia Tacoli mentions that women saving groups emerging in several cities in Asia could be a good starting point to bring the poorest households into decision-making.

Therefore, **city cooperation should focus on giving time to people to help them find their own ways instead of imposing solutions upon them.** And, in doing so, cities from the North will definitively have something to learn from successful approaches in the South!

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Source:

[Tacoli, C \(2017\), "Food \(In\)Security in Rapidly Urbanising, Low-Income Contexts", \*International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health\*, 14, 1554](#)

For more information:

An analysis of the Orangi Pilot Project can be found here:

<http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/7037IIED.pdf>

More information on local savings groups can be found in this IIED [Blog Entry](#) and [Policy Brief](#)

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