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Topic: Food and nutrition security

Title: The informal economy's role in feeding cities - a missing link in policy debates?

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Food security debates have disproportionately focused on availability, an agenda that is overwhelmingly productionist and rural in its orientation, based on the premise that food and nutrition insecurity is primarily a rural problem requiring increases in smallholder production. This agenda is proceeding despite overwhelming evidence of rapid urbanisation and the growing likelihood of an urban future for the majority of Africans. Food access hinges primarily on the individual or household's ability to purchase foodstuffs, which in turn depends on household income, the price of food and the location of food outlets. This presentation aims to interrogate what is currently known about the role played by informal economy in general, and informal retailers in particular, in food accessibility. The presentation begins considering the genealogy of the term 'informal sector' and then reviews urbanisation trends and estimates on the size and contribution of the informal economy. This evidence affirms that within the context of an urban future for Africa, informal work is a predominant source of non-agricultural employment on the most regions. Attention is then turned to the South African informal economy, which although smaller than developing country counterparts, is a significant source of employment. The presentation will outline evidence on the informal economies role in food sourcing of poorer households. This evidence is then used to critically assess current food security policy positions in South Africa, and the post-Apartheid policy response to the informal economy in general, both nationally and in key urban centres, identifying critical policy relevant research gaps.