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Urban Youth Food Environments and Lived Experiences in Bulawayo and Implications

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Why urban food environments matter for the youth? Evidence from lived experiences in Bulawayo

The Contextual Background

Historically, urban areas have been considered regions of relative plenty where most residents are expected to afford to eat well and live well. However, the situation has changed, with more urban residents becoming vulnerable with increasing urban poverty. Almost 4 million Zimbabweans were found to be suffering food insecurity. The situation is generally worse for urban residents who have to pay for food unlike rural dwellers who can grow most of their food. (Zimvac 2020) Most households enjoy poor diets with a low dietary diversity. Although there are many institutions that have a responsibility for food in Government and City Councils,



Exploring Dried Food Markets: Shasha Market.

the mandates are obscure and leave many people and aspects not covered. Furthermore, urban food matters are only given token attention by the public as well as governance and regulatory authorities. There is now a growing body of literature that observe the deteriorating urban food situation and a call for increased attention to urban food security. Youths have not been considered as an important constituency when it comes to issues of nutrition and health yet they constitute a large portion of the population of Bulawayo. This study sought to analyze the youth urban food environment in Bulawayo through a characterization of the urban food systems in the city as well as examining the lived experience of youths in selected neighbourhoods of the city. There is a large segment of the urban poor that have a poor food and nutrition status. Many people in poor neighbourhoods cannot afford three meals per day and many are documented to skip some meals (Tawodzera et al, 2019; ZimVAC, 2020).

KEY MESSAGES/HIGHLIGHTS

Evidence shows that

- The City of Bulawayo has town planning and other officers who are working on different food system mandates such as working with the informal sector to identify and establish food markets, working with producers to identify community gardens, and other areas such as public health.
- There is a general widespread provision of food infrastructure in the city, but there is little consideration of nutrition and health
- Poor areas are served by small shops that lack fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables. Large supermarkets were only found at large shopping centres such as the large mall at Entumbane Bus Terminus.
- Up to 90 percent of the respondents in low-income areas buy some of their food from informal traders who do not have authority to do business from their areas of operation
- There is low awareness and demand for healthy foods amongst youths in Bulawayo.
- Most traditional and healthy food in the city is supplied by informal traders who are not protected by regulations hence denying many residents healthy food options.
- Legislation and by-laws on food and nutrition in the city are outdated and this affects provision of healthy food

The Problem

Poor diets amongst youth aged 10 to 19 has resulted in rising health issues such as chronic malnutrition, anaemia, overweight, obesity and diabetes. There is a 25% prevalence of stunting, 2.3% obesity, 2.5% wasting and 8.3% underweight in this age group in Zimbabwe [ZNNs2018]. Food insecurity is a growing problem, with about 40% of households struggling to get a balanced nutritious meal everyday [Zimvac 2020].

There is a general perception that urban areas are food secure from just observing piles of rotting vegetables outside Bulawayo city markets. (Banda, 2020) This, however, is far from the case. Whilst marketers can throw away rotting vegetables and other food products because they have not been sold, most of those who eat poor diets cannot afford to buy the healthy foods. Whilst healthy food may be available at the markets, the issue of affordability militates against equal access to the food for all. Zimbabwe was identified as one of 11 African countries still lagging behind in "implementing healthy eating guidelines at national level" by the 2018 Barilla report titled Fixing Food. There is a general consensus that Zimbabwean diets lack diversity which in turn leads to nutrition problems for women and children. In an AFSUN study of selected low-income areas of Harare, most families were found to consume foods that were full of oils and carbohydrates but lacked many critical nutrients such as proteins that are needed for healthy human living (Tawodzera et al, 2012). Zimbabwe's 2013 National Food and Nutrition Security Policy is comprehensive. However, the laws and policies on Food Security are still fragmented and not clearly worked out at local/city level, and awareness on the policy is still low. This is particularly so among young people in the city.



Methodological Approach

The characterization of the youth food environment and food system of Bulawayo drew from the city region food systems assessment approach. The assessment had three components - a demographic, socio-economic, jurisdictional, and geographical context of the city, overview of city region food system and examination of the governance and policy framework of the food system.

Data was mainly collected from secondary sources as well as from interviews with key informants. Extensive food asset mapping of the different attributes that affect food such as location of food markets, shopping centres, supermarkets, restaurants, fast food outlets, and food outlets was done using GIS. In addition to the food systems focus, we worked with youths in two neighbourhood of Bulawayo – Entumbane and Four, using the 'lived-experience' approach where 500 youths were sampled. In addition, Youth Food Change Labs were also used to bring youths together in Bulawayo to discuss issues affecting their food diets and map the way forward in improving their food environments. A Food Change Lab (FCL) is a participatory innovation process that aims to provide a multi-stakeholder platform to enable citizens and opportunity to co-create a vision, influence decision making, prioritisation of issues, and co-create solutions to improve their city's food environment/system.

Key Findings from the Bulawayo Food Environment Assessment

- The legislation governing food is mostly outdated and not reflective of realities on the ground. Most laws support the formal and large-scale sector and do not recognise or support the critical role of small-scale and informal sector in feeding urban residents – estimates that 90% of low income urban residents get much of their food from the informal sector.
- 65% of food consumed in Bulawayo comes from outside - only 35% is produced locally, mostly on legal plots designated under the Urban Agriculture Policy of the City Council which designates and allocates land for food production for vulnerable groups and produce includes onions, maize, leafy vegetables, poultry and butternuts.
- Youths (90%) have very little say in what they consume as this is the prerogative of the parents, especially mothers.
- There is low awareness and demand for healthy foods amongst youths.
- The youths noted the unappealing presentation of some healthy food options. 'People want to eat our traditional food but the problem is food presentation which discourages this'
- Some households and youths (56%) buy their food

from the informal markets, and this has implications on food safety. There is need to work with these informal markets in providing minimum infrastructure to improve food safety.

- Taking a Food Environment perspective: the affordability, availability, accessibility and desirability (taste) influence food choices for youths in Bulawayo There is need to ensure that healthy food is more accessible to youths in the poor neighbourhoods of the city through planning for and the allocation of land for nutrition gardens for youths by city council.

Actions required

To improve the food habits of youths and improve their uptake of healthy food the following is suggested:

Raise Awareness and demand

- Urban local authorities should increase nutrition knowledge and information and create awareness on unhealthy diets for adolescents at places where they hang out.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education need to ensure school tuckshops sell nutritious food like fruits and healthy drinks to students.
- Restaurants and chefs should develop nutritious foods that attract young people, adapted to their taste, affordability and desirability need to be accessible. This can be done by Improving food preparations and presentation festivals, wellness days in the city.
- Urban local authorities and government should enforce regulations making it mandatory for fast foods to disclose ingredients for their foods so that customers are aware and can make informed decisions.
- Well-established critical institutions that have good structures and potential for wide reach such as FNC and municipal nutrition units need increased awareness on their existence and work at grassroots levels.
- The constitutional objective to 'encourage and promote adequate and proper nutrition through mass education and other appropriate means' must find its way through public campaigns, and community events such as food festivals, especially in cities.

Youth Spaces

- Urban local authorities and restaurants must design young people's social spaces to accommodate healthy food needs. It must be convenient and affordable for them to enjoy good food in their existing social spaces.
- The local authorities must create resource centers for health food at places where youths hang out.
- Schools and youth groups must encourage healthy food cooking competitions for youths so that they can develop healthy food recipes



Policy and Planning

- More adaptive governance - enhancing central government and urban local authority linkages in the implementation of nutrition and food security issues needed.
- Civil society should lobby and advocate for a thorough review of the FNS Policy and local policies on food and nutrition for the incorporation of youth-friendly issues on food environments.
- Planners should create City Green Belts in city master plans which should be sensitive to food systems in order to create a people-centred food environment.
- Urban local authorities should plan for the designation and provision of appropriate infrastructure for selling nutritious and healthy food in a formal and clean environment.

REFERENCES

ZimVAC (2021) Urban Livelihoods Assessment.

Further Reading

This policy brief is drawn from a full report entitled, **An Analysis of the Urban Food Environment and Lived Experiences of Urban Youth in Harare and Bulawayo, March 2022**

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