Stories from the Global Call on Agricultural Innovation

Women and Youth Farmer led Urban Food System Transformation: Urban Food Hives in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

As urbanization progresses, accessing nutritious and healthy foods has become challenging for households and communities due to the complex nature of food systems and poverty. The Urban Food Hives Initiative (UFH) in Uganda aims to build resilient, nutritious, equitable, and regenerative food systems in Kampala, with a focus on the voices and leadership of women and youth. Currently, most small-scale, informal actors in Ugandan food systems, including farmers, informal vendors and distributors, do not receive fair economic returns. Oxfam's approach to transforming urban food systems is grounded in principles of agroecology and is part of a multi-country programme contributing to a new vision for the future of food.

The objective of UFH is to promote access to safe, healthy foods by strengthening agroecological farming, urban food linkages and marketing, and multistakeholder policy mechanisms for urban food system coordination. By empowering women and youth to grow their own food and utilizing agroecology practices to maximize production in urban settings, as well as coordinating civil society policies to create an enabling environment, UFH can meet the growing demand for food resulting from urbanization sustainability, without further environmental degradation. Additionally, a robust urban agrifood system will enhance employment opportunities for young people and increase access to nutritious traditional foods, which urban populations have limited knowledge of.

TAPipedia Tags

gender equality, agribusiness, innovation, rural development, sustainable development

Other keywords

urban food system, agroecology, women and youth, multistakeholder systemic change, urban agriculture

Context

Today's global food systems are experiencing significant challenges that are exacerbated by factors such as climate change and ongoing conflicts. These issues have exposed the existing inequalities and inefficiencies within our food systems, especially in urban settings. It is paradoxical that the very individuals who contribute to the production, processing, packaging and distribution of our food, including women, men, youth, indigenous populations and immigrants, are the ones being left behind. Moreover, most food systems are environmentally harmful and are contributing to the degradation of the ecosystems they rely on, particularly in developing communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the vulnerability of supply chains and demonstrated that poverty, hunger and malnutrition are no longer confined to rural areas.

In Uganda, urbanization is rapidly growing. The capital, Kampala, has witnessed significant growth and is among the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country. According to the World Bank (2020), almost half of the population will reside in urban areas in 2050. In 2021, Oxfam in Uganda conducted a baseline study on consumer behaviour and revealed that 90 percent of Kampala's population relies on purchased food. This creates disparities in food access due to week food safety regulations, unjust taxation practices imposed on local food vendors and inadequate infrastructure for food storage. The insufficient transport and distribution systems, particularly for perishable items, further strain the urban food system and compromise food safety.

About **90 percent** of Kampala's population relies on purchased food

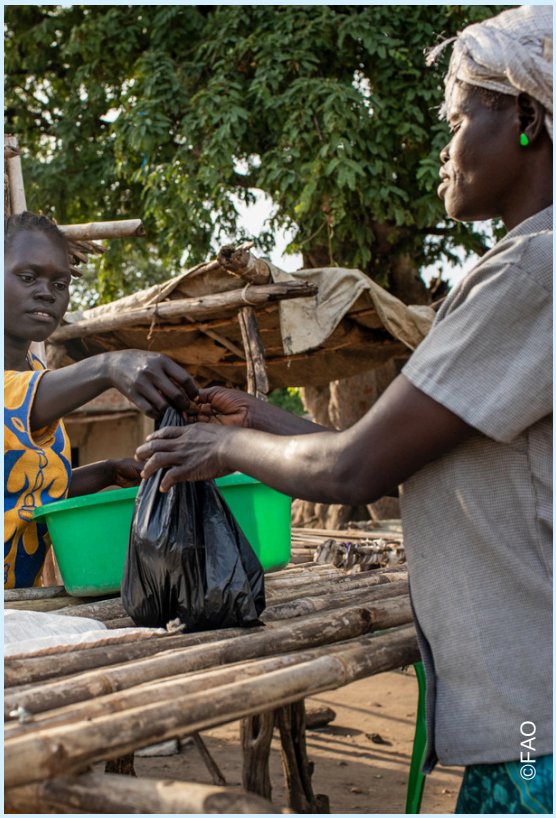
Urban agriculture has proved to be one pathway to ensure that vulnerable populations in urban areas can gain access to healthy food. In Uganda, urban farming emerged as a response to political and economic crises in the 1970s and has become widely practiced in Kampala. Urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) includes vegetable production, livestock keeping (especially poultry, dairy cattle and pigs), and cultivation of staple crops like cassava in peri-urban areas. UPA involves individuals from various income classes, with active participation from women. This sector is vital for ensuring nutritional and food security, as well as contributing to the vibrancy of the informal market. Additionally, UPA helps reduce urban waste streams by repurposing organic waste as livestock feed and input for vegetable production. As the global population increasingly moves toward urban areas, with projections indicating that over 70 percent of people will lives in cities by 2050, it is crucial to foster the development of inclusive, resilient and sustainable food systems in urban and peri-urban regions. This should be accompanied by the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships between urban and rural dwellers. Urban and peri-urban areas, like Kampala, need robust and sustainable food systems to ensure the availability of fresh and nutritious food, establish strong connections with rural areas, promote urban agriculture and access to markets, and formulate clear pathways for transitioning to a more efficient food system.

The youth climate activist group (CivAct) repurpose water bottles for container gardening in Luzira

> *"In the beginning we used to harvest vegetables to feed the school once a month. Now we can harvest vegetables to feed the school children every week"*
>
> -GRACE AJILONG,
> LUZIRA CHURCH OF UGANDA

Key Problems

Urban farmers and market gardeners face numerous challenges. These include inadequate land for agriculture in the urban core, loss of valuable cropland due to expanding peri-urban areas, water shortages during dry seasons, pests and diseases, and a lack of agricultural skills and investment. In this context, the informal market plays a crucial role in providing accessible and convenient food options. UPA producers predominantly sell their products in informal markets, including individual households, illegal or semi-legal stalls, and street/pavement retailers. Although the informal market offers relatively inexpensive products and saves time and transportation costs for impoverished urban households, city officials view food sold in this market as a security risk due to concerns about congestion and inadequate product quality, handling, storage and processing.



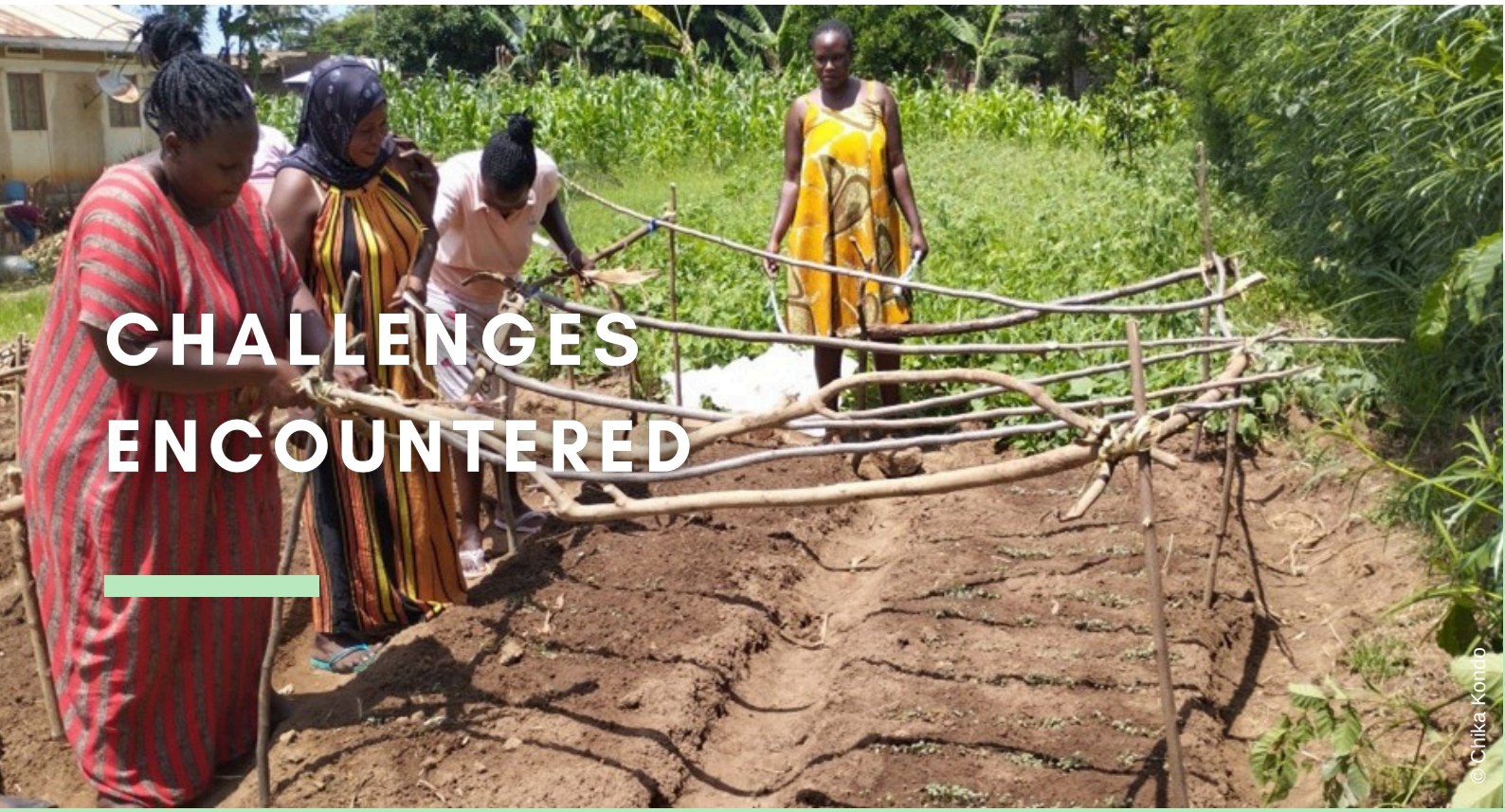
Due to poor soil conditions, youth farmers from CivAct utilizes container gardening to maximize growing space.

1. By mobilizing youth and women, we are empowering them to take the lead in reimagining urban spaces as fertile grounds for kitchen gardens, school gardens and community growing spaces. They are breaking free from the myth that urban spaces are incompatible with agriculture and transforming vacant lots, balconies and front and backyard spaces into thriving gardens. These gardens not only feed families, but also nurture agroecology practices.

2. In addition to developing agroecology leaders in urban spaces, we also establish centers of excellence using the farmer field approach. These centers become hubs of learning and inspiration where urban residents can observe, participate and then apply the knowledge they gain to cultivate their own kitchen gardens. By combining theory with practical experience, we empower individuals to become stewards of their own food security.

3. We focus on reclaiming indigenous varieties and heritage foods. These foods, which have long been the lifeline of many rural communities and were once the lifeblood of urban areas, should not be forgotten. By connecting these nutritionally and culturally rich foods to urban populations, we address urban malnutrition, diversify modern diets and preserve traditional foods. This way, we can prevent the loss of heritage for the growing young population.

4. To create an effective food system governance structure on urban food systems, we adopt a multistakeholder approach that builds on the efforts of those who have already initiated change. Previous attempts at urban food system coordination have failed to institutionalize a sustainable mechanism. To cultivate a thriving ecosystem of sustainable food production, it is crucial to have adequate buy-in and commitment to practicing multistakeholder decision making. We continue this work through strategic partnerships with a coalition of civil society organizations and government institutions to strengthen opportunity gaps.



CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

Urban Food Hives participants engage in training on nursery set up and management.

Access to Land

Often, land in urban settings that holds potential use for urban farming is owned by someone that does not reside in Kampala. Therefore, identifying the landowner and establishing a use agreement for urban farming use is a significant hurdle. Where there are well-wishers who are willing to let others use the land for agriculture production is the target for the Urban Food Hives. In addition, working with local leaders and mayors to secure communal land is proving to be a viable option.

Lack of Rainwater

The impact of climate change has caused prolonged flooding, crop-destroying hailstorms, and extended droughts. As a result, we have been actively researching strategies to enhance the resilience of gardens. These include implementing rainwater harvesting, optimizing soil fertility, and cultivating a variety of crops at different trophic levels to minimize damage. Our goal is to improve crop resilience and ensure survival even in harsh climate conditions.

Scaling Production to Establish Stable Markets

Establishing economic opportunities for women and youth is a key challenge. Coordination on aggregation and distribution will be key in ensuring that future markets such as restaurants, supermarkets and other vendors have a reliable source to access agroecologically grown food. Another intervention is to work with vendors who are interested in setting up direct market corners for UFH farmers to sell their surplus.

Coordination Challenges Hinder Effective Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

Despite efforts by organizations like the Kampala City Council Authority (KCCA) and various NGOs, disjointed actions lead to unrealized outcomes in food security and nutrition. To address this, Oxfam with partners and governmental bodies are spearheading dialogues to promote inclusive approaches and recognize the importance of urban food systems.

Factors for Success

Effective Baseline Study to Identify the Problem of Urban Food Systems Gaps

In 2021, Oxfam conducted an in-depth study to analyse the key issues regarding urban food access and identified infrastructural, policy legal, regulatory, taxation, social-economic and financing gaps.

Strong Collaborations and Partners

Establishing strong relationships with partners is key to ensuring that we leverage resources effectively and create the most impact possible. Having women and youth farmers who are interested in learning and applying agroecology in urban spaces is key to starting urban agricultural production. Committing relevant stakeholders who understand the need for and importance of creating coordination to transform urban food systems is equally important to ensure that more systemic change is being targeted and implemented. The gaps within urban food systems are best addressed on the systems level as there are infrastructural gaps such as creating market spaces that farmers and consumers can easily access. Developing a better enabling environment through policy and regulations to create better coordination.

Leadership Development

Training effective community leaders will ensure that communities can continue to add more people into the leadership pipeline to increase how much urban land is committed to agroecological production. Community leadership and amplifying voices of the most vulnerable populations impacted by lack of urban food security can ensure that food system coordination and design are done by communities and for communities. We utilized a trainer of trainer model to train urban farmers on effective ways to grow that maximize small growing spaces using everyday materials that can be repurposed. This has been effective for even residents in poor living conditions to grow on rooftops and any spaces they can secure to grow vegetables.

CRITICAL CAPACITIES

A robust food system coordination mechanism is crucial for the success of this innovation. Ineffective collaboration and poor coordination among stakeholders can undermine the impact of urban food system coordination.

Communication breakdowns and lack of funding often result in one-time efforts that do not last. Limited funding and personnel capacity can hinder effective policy advocacy, program implementation and outreach and engagement.

What sets this UFH apart, is its inclusive and diverse representation, reflecting the many key stakeholders involved in food systems: farmers, distributors, retailers, consumers, community advocates and local governments.

Moreover, setting both short-term goals and long-term visions ensures sustained efforts to address complex issues within food systems and bring about meaningful change. Lastly, effective leadership and facilitation are crucial to ensuring continuity and the development of long-term strategies in a multistakeholder initiative like urban food system coordination.

Outcomes and Measurable Impacts

Pop-up Urban Farms and Skills Hub

Objective: to enhance technical capacities of urban women and youth food producers, support their access to inputs and space to grow healthy foods.

- 52 youth (25 male and 27 female), 22 women and 8 men have been trained on agroecology practices of nursery development, space efficient growing techniques using recyclable materials, and knowledge on setting up their own kitchen gardens. Through the trainings, many women growers have been able to realize the potential of building a viable business venture with other added benefits such as reduction in cost of food purchase and access to healthy foods for their families.

- Seven gardens have been established resulting from the training conducted at the demonstration farm.

- Over 600 students consume vegetables grown in the urban farms for their school meals. A grower's manual was produced based on the contributions of trainers and community participants.

- Monthly training delivered in appropriate, scalable urban and profitable urban food production agroecological and intensified food production (including livestock, fisheries and poultry) technologies and practices.

- Identified at least 4 women and young people food producer entrepreneurs (foodpreneurs) champions that will take the technologies and practices as their own, access adequate land and use any other space they can get hold of home, grow foods, and also show others how to do the same.

Civil Society Food Systems Coordination Mechanism

Objective: to bring together experts into a "think tank" group to deliberate how Uganda's urban food systems can be collectively transformed to deliver safe, nutritious foods to all. The concept will be aimed at creating enabling environments for all systems actors to operate fairly, equitably and in a sustainable manner. This is an ongoing process.

- To create an ongoing method for community voices to be listened to and heard within and during policy discussions and government decision making on key issues connected to urban food systems in Kampala.

- Create a regular mechanism for dialogue around urban food issues and with experts on urban food in Uganda food issues with key stakeholders within government and the food industry.

- Position the team as key advocates and urban food system policy coordination group in Uganda.

Market Linkages between Urban Agroecological Producers and Consumers

Objective: to link food producers to markets so that food producers can earn some money from their efforts of growing foods using techniques and skills that they obtain from skills hub, community farms and kitchen gardens.

- Social enterprise training and development of urban producers.

- To encourage trade in safe and nutritious foods by linking producers and vendors.

- Integrate the use of ICT apps, particularly KilimoMart App for scaling up the sales of food produced by urban food producers.

Lessons Learned

To address the transformation of local and regional food systems in urban areas, it is necessary to not only scale up agroecological urban farming practices, but also improve coordination of food policies. Effective coordination of food policies is essential to address food-related challenges and promote the development of resilient and equitable local food systems in urban areas. Such coordination requires collaboration among civil society stakeholders, local government bodies, national-level ministries, private sector entities and various actors involved in the food system chain. By establishing essential conditions such as policy development, access to open data and knowledge, mobilization of public and private financial resources, and governance mechanisms, these collective efforts can significantly influence the prioritization, design, funding and implementation of programs aimed at achieving transformative change.

1. The Urban Food Hives Initiative was launched through a bottom-up approach, where baseline research was carried out to identify the need to focus on transforming food systems in urban areas. Through these research efforts, the UFH was piloted in multiple countries: Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, the Philippines and Colombia. As a result, cross-country learning exchanges have frequently taken place, allowing country offices to share knowledge, experiences, and troubleshoot any issues that may arise. This serves as an effective learning platform, not only to maintain motivation during challenges, but also to apply potential solutions to different contexts through cross-pollination.

2. Women agroecology champions have revolutionized backyard farming, showcasing resourcefulness, innovation and sustainability. Repurposing everyday items like broken chairs and paint buckets into trellises and planters, they maximize space and minimize waste, exemplifying the potential of urban farming. Integrating livestock such as chickens and rabbits enhances sustainability and soil fertility. Vertical farming techniques like vertical towers optimize space for growing crops, while outdoor cooking spaces utilize rocks for low-energy cooking, reducing environmental impact. These women serve as community leaders, sharing knowledge through workshops and demonstrations, inspiring others to embrace sustainable practices. Their efforts not only address food security, but also promote resilience and empowerment in urban communities. As beacons of hope, they demonstrate the transformative power of sustainable agriculture in building resilient, equitable and sustainable food systems for the future.

3. Conduct a strong baseline to identify resource gaps and leverage effective collaborations: Coordinating food systems is a challenging endeavour, as it requires bringing stakeholders together and committing their efforts to systemic change, which is resource-intensive and time-consuming. This is why effective collaboration is crucial for sustainable change. While donors and international NGOs can be effective catalysts in bringing key stakeholders together, it is critical to institutionalize food system coordination to establish an accountability structure that builds robust and resilient food systems. This involves empowering local governments and partners to host coordination efforts and strengthen policies. By learning from past experiences and identifying best practices, we can ensure that we are not reinventing the wheel, but creating cumulative change. This is why open dialogue and learning exchanges are essential in cultivating long-lasting change.

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Oxfam in Uganda is an international NGO that works with governments, communities, civil society, non-governmental organizations and private sector partners to positively impact the lives of people in Uganda, particularly women, youth and vulnerable communities.

Community Integrated Development Initiatives (CIDI) is a national NGO centered on community development such as sustainable agriculture for food and incomes.

JERO Farm is an agroecological farm that grows vegetables, medicinal herbs, livestock and train thousands of women and youth on agroecological farming.

Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) is Kampala's city planning agency and supports urban agriculture policy and hosts a demonstration farm of visitors.

Food Rights Alliance (FRA) is a coalition of over 40 members comprised of local and international NGOs working on issues of agriculture, food and nutrition security at household, community and national level.

Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF)

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)

THE TROPICAL AGRICULTURE PLATFORM

The Tropical Agriculture Platform (TAP) is a G-20 initiative launched in 2012 to promote agricultural innovation in the tropics. TAP has formed a coalition of more than 50 partners, led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and generously supported by the European Union (EU). The main goal of TAP is to strengthen agricultural innovation systems (AIS) in developing countries through coordinated multi-stakeholder interventions.

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