

**FCND DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 41****THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF URBAN FOOD SECURITY IN  
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

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## ABSTRACT

Sub-Saharan African cities in the late 1990s face a daunting set of problems including rapid growth, increasing poverty, deteriorating infrastructure, and inadequate capacity for service provision. However, even as a renewed debate is shaping up around issues of urban development, there is little attention given to the question of urban food security and nutrition. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, urban food problems in Africa commanded political attention, the nature of urban food insecurity in the 1990s is such that it has tended to lose political importance. This is largely because in the 1970s, the problem was one of outright food shortages and rapid price changes that affected large portions of the urban population simultaneously. The impact of structural adjustment, continued rapid growth, and an increase in urban poverty make food insecurity in the 1990s primarily a problem of access by the urban poor. Under circumstances where the urban poor spend a very large portion of their total income on food, urban poverty rapidly translates food insecurity. The lack of formal safety nets, and the shifting of responsibility for coping with food insecurity away from the state towards the individual and household level has tended to atomize and muffle any political response to this new urban food insecurity.

This paper briefly reviews urban food insecurity and generates a set of empirical questions for an analysis of food and livelihood security in contemporary urban Sub-Saharan Africa, and then examines historical and contemporary evidence from Kampala, Uganda, and Accra, Ghana, to suggest some tentative conclusions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan African cities face enormous challenges heading into the twenty-first century, yet remarkably, some of these challenges are not fully established as political issues in the debate over urban poverty, urban management, the devolution of government, or popular participation. This paper argues that urban food security is one such issue. The nature of the urban food security question has changed considerably in the past quarter century. This paper will briefly review some “stylized facts” about urbanization, poverty, and food security in Sub-Saharan Africa. It will then briefly examine existing literature on urban food security in Africa both retrospectively and prospectively. The objective of the review is to generate some working hypotheses, and to suggest some questions, which are then used as the basis for examining several empirical cases. The paper draws on urban examples from Ghana and Uganda to examine the questions raised (examples that are intended to be illustrative of the kinds of empirical issues suggested for research, although not necessarily offering exhaustive answers to those questions).

The litany of problems facing African cities is well known: rates of urban population growth continue to be among the highest in the world—though somewhat lower now than in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, by the year 2000, over 40 percent of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to be living in urban areas (United

Nations 1995), and the proportion will reach 50 percent early in the next century. Given the differential rates at which urban populations and urban economies are growing, the infrastructural and tax bases of cities cannot catch up with the services demanded by the expanding urban population (Becker, Jamer, and Morrison 1994; Farvacque and McAuslan 1992), leading to increasing crowding and a deteriorating urban environment (Stren, White, and Whitney 1992). The deterioration in infrastructure and capacity of municipal governments to deliver services combined with the rapidly growing population make access to health care, water, housing, and education—once considered unproblematic—a renewed source of concern (UNCHS 1996).

Urban economies in Sub-Saharan Africa declined markedly during the 1970s and 1980s, partly for underlying structural reasons, and partly as a result of policy measures, implemented under structural adjustment. Poverty data disaggregated at the rural/urban level are scarce, but urban poverty appears to be increasing in much of the continent (de Haan 1997). Unemployment and underemployment are serious problems, also compounded by rapid rates of growth in population (UNCHS 1996). The urban low-income working class and the poor devote large but variable proportions—60 percent to 80 percent—of their total incomes to procurement of food (Tabatabai 1993; Gebre 1993), which to a large extent means that poverty is manifested as food insecurity. Means of access to food have been increasingly diversified to include formal market access, informal markets, nonmarket transfers, urban subsistence production, and, increasingly, to “street foods,” or food prepared outside the household. While urban food economies may offer a

global supermarket for the urban well-to-do, vulnerable groups have to rely on a narrow range of very localized coping strategies (Drakakis-Smith 1991).

While rural areas are likely to remain the major locus of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa well into the twenty-first century, the rate at which this locus is shifting to urban areas is rapid and requires much greater policy attention (Naylor and Falcon 1995). Static rural/urban comparisons for a variety of health and development indicators suggest that urban populations are still better-off than their rural counterparts, but there is growing intra-urban inequality, and the rural/urban gap in various indicators of well-being appear to be growing smaller (von Braun et al. 1993).

With the general movement toward more democratic governance in the 1990s, the move toward decentralization and devolution in theory strengthens municipal governments, and their capacity to deal with these problems. But it also puts increased demands on already-strained capacities, and often with little more than token budgetary support from central governments. However, even with the devolution of political authority from central to local government, questions remain about the access of the urban poor to local political processes.

Development theory has long been somewhat schizophrenic toward cities and urbanization in Africa. Modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s equated urbanization with industrialization, and considered both to be appropriate indicators of growth and development. By the 1970s and 1980s, populist revision of modernization theory had advanced the view that rapid urban growth was a “parasitic process which led to

underdevelopment and the neglect of agriculture” (Baker and Pedersen 1992, 12)—a problem to be solved, not an indicator of development. The view in the 1990s is more equivocal, but discussions of “over-urbanization” and overly rapid urbanization are still very common (Becker, Jamer, and Morrison 1994).

Fortunately, the role of cities in the development process is now being reexamined, and urban poverty is back on the agenda, both in terms of research and donor priorities (de Haan 1997; Ruel et al. 1997; UNCHS 1996; Amis 1995; Moser 1995). However, the extent to which these “global” concerns affect local politics and municipal governance is highly variable. And, in spite of the long list of woes just mentioned, food security issues have all but dropped out of the political debate in African cities, and malnutrition was not on the urban political agenda in the first place. The argument advanced in this paper is that urban food insecurity, while very real, has become a politically invisible problem in contemporary African cities. Several reasons for this are suggested here: first, food insecurity and malnutrition are relatively invisible to urban planners and managers in comparison with more urgently visible urban political problems—unemployment, the burgeoning informal sector, overcrowding, decaying infrastructure, and declining services—even though food insecurity and malnutrition are intimately linked with all of these other problems.

Second, urban food insecurity and malnutrition are made invisible to both urban managers and national policymakers by the very nature of their manifestation: unless there are major food supply problems, or sudden increases in food prices—that is, unless there



are food-related problems that affect a large number of the urban population negatively and simultaneously, food insecurity in the 1990s must be dealt with at the household level, and rarely becomes a political issue. Food and nutrition problems in cities are not particularly linked to seasonal changes or other community-wide phenomena, but rather to the individual fortunes of households and household members on the labor market and in the informal economy. Food insecurity in cities is much more an individual- or household-level phenomenon, and much less a community phenomenon, than in rural Africa.

Third, for more than two decades, development theory has suggested that food insecurity and poverty in general are rural problems, not urban problems. The static urban/rural welfare indicator comparisons mentioned above reinforce this belief, but do little to depict the changes in trends. Severe food insecurity, or famines, are not urban phenomena in Africa, but that does not mean that food insecurity and malnutrition are not urban phenomena. Food production and the availability of food in the market are only two components of food security. More importantly for urban populations are the issues of income and access to the food that is available.

## **2. URBAN FOOD INSECURITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A BRIEF REVIEW**

Food security is commonly defined as “access by all people at all times to sufficient food for an active healthy life” (World Bank 1986). “Access” may be either through own production, or through purchases and transfers. In the late 1970s, the combination of

unprecedented rates of rural/urban migration and agricultural stagnation gave rise to serious concerns over maintaining the supply of food to politically volatile urban populations in Africa (World Bank 1981; Eicher 1982)—the concern with urban food security was expressed much more in terms of the availability of food than access to food.

## URBAN BIAS

To explain how this situation had arisen, a variety of perspectives were suggested, one of the most influential of which was the “urban bias” thesis of Michael Lipton:

The most important class conflict in the poor countries of the world today is not between labor and capital. Nor is it between foreign and national interests. It is between the rural classes and the urban classes. The rural sector contains most of the poverty, and most of the low-cost sources of potential advance; but the urban sector contains most of the articulateness, organization and power (Lipton 1977, 13).

Lipton's work was based primarily on experience in India. Relying on a rational choice interpretation, Bates (1981) provided a more in-depth exploration of the micro-foundations of urban bias in Africa. He analyzed the political rationale for state control over markets and suggested that African states were likely to appease the most vocal political interests—better organized urban constituencies—even while seeking to “levy

from the countryside money, people, food and raw materials” in order to “restructure the patterns of advantage both within the countryside and between the countryside and urban industrial areas” (Bates 1981, 6).

The theory of urban bias became one of the intellectual cornerstones of international initiatives to resurrect economic growth in Africa, by permitting market forces, rather than (urban-biased) bureaucracies, to set prices for both rural primary commodities and urban food supplies. In general, the policy environment in the 1980s and early 1990s in Africa has been oriented toward building the basis of long-term economic growth by tilting domestic terms of trade toward rural producers (von Braun et al. 1993).

Although structural adjustment policies have reversed many of the factors believed to have given urban populations an economic and political advantage in the 1970s, urban bias theory still shapes the views of planners and policymakers toward cities and urban populations in the 1990s, although perhaps not to the extent that it once did. This “urban-bias bias” is the third source of contemporary blindness toward the problem of urban food security mentioned above.

## BEYOND URBAN BIAS

The major comparative work on urban food security in Africa in the 1980s (Guyer 1987) examined in detail the spatial and social relations of urban food supply over the course of the 20th century, including production, trade, and imports. Guyer seriously

queried the extent to which state control over markets was as dominant as the urban bias literature suggested:

The overwhelming evidence of a triumvirate of dominant conditions in present-day African food economies—low production at the farm level, high levels of management by the state, and pressing conditions in the international economic context—must not, however, eclipse the continuing, and perhaps increasing importance of all those forms of organization which continue to funnel food from rural areas to cities. In terms of actually feeding the cities, as distinct from generating a commotion about it, the nonstate sector is still critical. Were it not for the complexity of local production patterns and transactions....the current crises over imports and balance of payments would surely have more far-reaching effects on levels of welfare. Parallel markets, unauthorized sales across international borders, small-scale production in the urban and peri-urban areas, legal and illegal entrepreneurship, and hunting and gathering in the urban jungle are the local processes which support the food market and at the same time undermine any possibility of complete control over it (Guyer 1987, 45).

Guyer's work presaged some of the issues raised by Jamal and his colleagues at the ILO (Jamal 1988; Jamal and Weeks 1993). Jamal and Weeks argued that much of the

urban economy, including the food supply system, had “adjusted before adjustment,” as a means of escaping or by-passing state controls. Thus, for example, where formal (state controlled) marketing boards could not supply sufficient food to cities at the official price, the informal (“black”) market supplied it at unofficial (higher) prices, and in fact, encouraged all the kinds of issues highlighted by Guyer above. Jamal and Weeks, however, looked much more at the question of access, putting it in terms of the cost of food compared to wages, and concluded that by the mid to late 1980s, higher prices in parallel food markets, and lowered real wages due to inflation had, in fact, reduced or wiped out rural/urban differences in purchasing power.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the impact of policies that lifted state control over food marketing, combined with the other immediate policy impacts of structural adjustment, were keenly felt by urban populations across Africa (Demery and Squire 1996; Sahn, Dorosh, and Younger 1996). Agriculture-led economic recovery, the liberalization of markets, and the reform of exchange rates became the supply-side policy responses to the economic growth concerns in the 1980s. “Stabilization,” and “adjustment” became the nearly universally accepted watch words of both macroeconomic policy and food policy. Austerity budgets implemented to help begin to bring government expenditure and balance of payments problems under control provided the initial shock of stabilization; agricultural market liberalization led, in many cases, to sharply increased food prices. Walton and Seddon

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<sup>1</sup>Ghana and Uganda were both included in Jamal and Weeks’ analysis. Table 2 is largely based on their calculations.

(1994) elaborate these factors to examine the occurrence of “austerity riots”—overt political protest and disturbances directly related to austerity programs implemented under the aegis of structural adjustment, and relate these to the literature of “food riots” of the past. These contemporary political protests are linked to more than just the price of food, but access to food and other basic urban necessities are at their root. Worldwide, they detail 146 urban disturbances of this type between 1976 and 1992, associated with austerity programs implemented by governments. These occurred in Africa through the 1980s and early 1990s. Not surprisingly, these political disturbances were the strongest in the most urbanized of African countries—most notably Zambia and the Ivory Coast—but also in Ghana (Riley and Parfitt 1994). Contrary to popular belief, these were not necessarily protests by the poorest, but rather by those who perceived impoverishment and the loss of entitlement by the changed economic and political circumstances.

While, in many instances, the market reforms of structural adjustment brought about price shocks that led to political protests in the short term, in the longer term, these reforms appear to have reduced problems in overall food supply to the cities. Certainly, “feeding the cities” is no longer the political issue that it was in the 1980s. This is precisely the major argument of this paper, namely: the removal of major supply constraints has tended to close down the political debate, even at a time when access at the household or individual level is being reduced due to increased urban poverty.

## MIGRATION

One final important general note in a retrospective look at urban food security is the issue of rural to urban migration. The extremely high rate of rural/urban migration in Africa has long been viewed as a response to urban bias, with negative implications for agricultural development. Migration patterns were thus believed to be a trend that could and should be altered by changing macroeconomic policy—further justification for the liberalization of agriculture and structural adjustment, and for the “shock” of adjustment to be borne primarily by the urban population. A recent review shows very little empirical research on migration in Africa in the adjustment or post-adjustment era (Becker, Jamer, and Morrison 1994). Nevertheless, the pre-adjustment view tends to prevail: while the immediate payoffs to the migrant may not be what they were 30 years ago, long-term possibilities are still higher in cities than in the countryside, and this is the factor driving migration; and it is the young, the well educated, and the upwardly mobile who are the migrants.

A different literature is concerned with the increase of urban poverty, and has posited a strikingly different view of migration—aptly named the "urbanization of poverty" thesis (Piel 1997; Amis and Rakodi 1994; Mabogunje 1990; O'Connor 1983). This view suggests that, far from being an upwardly mobile strategy, migration has become a rural coping strategy of last resort. Increased population pressure, environmental deterioration, increased commercialization of agriculture, and the privatization of land rights are all cited as possible (and documented, but usually not quantified) causes of both migration and increased urban poverty. The literature on rural

livelihoods and coping with rural food insecurity, at least in West Africa, where much of this work has been done, indicates that migration is in response not just to the difference between “average” rural and urban wages, but also to the difference in the variability of “wages” (or returns to labor) in the two contexts, and the unpredictability of the variability in rural “wages”; the need to diversify income sources for an entire household, by straddling both the rural and urban sectors; and simply to reduce the number of mouths to feed in the rural area, irrespective of whether the urban migrants do any better for themselves, or are able to remit any earnings (e.g., Davies 1996). From the point of view of a theory predicting an individual’s migration choices, there may be little real difference between these views: whether an upwardly mobile strategy, or a coping strategy, urban migration is still the preferable choice. But from a policy point of view, there are major differences implied in terms of the spatial distribution of poverty. The paucity of data makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions.

#### URBAN FOOD SECURITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A CONTEMPORARY VIEW

Both the West Africa Long-Term Perspectives Study (WALTPS) (OECD 1995) and Becker et al. (1994) note that, if successful, structural adjustment will ultimately have a highly urbanizing impact in the longer term, through renewed economic growth. The WALTPS report projects that population in the West African subregion will double between 1995 and 2020, and two-thirds of this growth will be in cities. The study projects both the growth of urban economies and the growth of urban poverty inequality—the



latter especially in the big cities. Elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, the trend is much the same: though growth rates are not as high as they were in the 1970s, Africa is still rapidly urbanizing (United Nations 1995).

It is widely agreed that urban poverty is increasing, and is the major single consideration in an analysis of urban food security, given the high proportion of total income that the urban poor are forced to spend on food. However, it is often not clear what is driving the increase in urban poverty. The “urbanization of poverty” thesis suggests that one of the driving forces is changed patterns of migration, and changed circumstances of migrants (Mabogunje 1990; 1991). Increased inequality is certainly a symptom of urban poverty in an era in which improved growth rates are accompanied by increases in poverty, but in itself hardly constitutes an explanation. Declining standards of living for the middle class because of impacts of economic restructuring and the policy impacts of structural adjustment are also often offered as a partial explanation (World Bank 1995; Chew 1990; Alderman 1994). Informal-sector involution—the crowding-in of unskilled, self-employed labor into a market growing at a relatively slower pace or not growing at all—certainly accounts for part of declining incomes in this sector of the urban economy, which is where the urban poor are forced to earn their living (ISSER 1995).

In her recent overview of urban food security, Atkinson notes that given current trends, the question of urban food security could become the “greatest humanitarian challenge of the next century” (Atkinson 1995, 152). She outlined five major factors for analysis. These include supply, access, choice, health, and social organization. She

highlights the decline of formal safety nets, and their replacement by informal, community and household responses, and analyzes the changes in urban livelihood strategies as major factors for consideration in the analysis of food access. The issue of choice has to do with dietary change, and the influence of advertizing. The health issues highlighted are classic urban concerns: crowding, unsanitary living conditions, deteriorating water, and sewerage infrastructure. Regarding social organization, perhaps the most pertinent question is how appropriate the “household” is as a unit of analysis in urban areas. Certainly the structure of urban households is more variable, the boundaries fuzzier, and the institution weaker than many of the models applied to rural households. And there is a significant population in most cities that does not belong to households at all. The implication Atkinson draws is that, while social organization must be factored into any analysis of food security, uncritical approaches to the “household,” or indeed even to residentially defined “communities,” may not be appropriate in urban areas. Other forms of organization, particularly related to livelihood, may be equally important.

In effect, Atkinson is offering a rationale for an analysis of urban food security based on an understanding of livelihood security or an extended entitlements approach to food security (Davies 1996), not just urban food supply—the central issue in the urban food security literature in the 1970s and 1980s. Such an approach inevitably includes an analysis of “households” (or units of production, resource pooling or transfers, and consumption), but also includes the ways in which individuals and these larger units have

adapted to radically changed circumstances, and seeks to understand both the changes and the adaptations made because of the changes.

Virtually all of the research cited above is in the food and nutrition literature (summarized, for example, by Ruel et al. 1997; Atkinson 1992; von Braun et al. 1993), *not* in the literature on urban development, urban management, or even urban politics. As noted at the outset, food questions, with a few exceptions, have dropped off the agenda of urban planners, managers, and political leaders.<sup>2</sup> One exception to this observation is the high profile visibility suddenly accorded to urban agriculture in Africa. After having been absolute anathema to urban planners in Africa in the 1980s, the topic has recently become highly visible—even fashionable—in part due to a new appreciation for its rationale, and in part because of high-level attention given to the topic by international agencies.<sup>3</sup>

While the urban literature has not been directly concerned with food security *per se*, there has been more emphasis in this literature on the nature of relations between local government and the informal economy (Tripp 1997), and other elements of the puzzle implied in an analysis of urban food security (O'Connor 1983). But the linkages between these issues and the distinctly “urban” elements of the food security question remain

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<sup>2</sup>Two admittedly anecdotal, but nevertheless very telling, examples can be offered: One is the virtual absence of food security issues from the agenda of the HABITAT II Conference held in Ankara in June, 1996 (a global, not just African, conference, but in which, nevertheless, African problems were highlighted). The second occurred in early 1997 at an Africa-wide UNICEF workshop on the problems of children in African cities. Some 200 delegates, many of them mayors and urban managers, had to choose among four working groups at the three-day workshop—a total of six chose the working group on food security and nutrition, and none of them were mayors or urban managers.

<sup>3</sup>These include, among other international actors, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the UN Urban Management Programme, the Canadian International Development Research Centre, and the World Bank.

largely underexplored. And the linkage is not just an argument of increased poverty causing increased food insecurity—as important as this issue is—but also understanding how the urban poor organize their activities to protect access to sufficient food, and how such activities can inform the debates over intervention into urban poverty.

To sum up, urban populations in Africa are growing rapidly, and urban poverty and inequality is increasing. The major food supply bottlenecks of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the price shocks of adjustment programs in the 1980s, are problems that have been largely resolved, at least in the short to medium term. Largely because of these latter two points, urban food security issues—long defined as the problem of “feeding the cities,” or aggregate food supply and price considerations—have dropped off the political agenda of urban planners and urban managers, and, indeed, specifically “urban” food security problems receive relatively little attention from national food or nutrition policy planners. In brief, food insecurity in cities in Africa in the 1990s is relatively invisible: first, because it tends not to be linked to seasonal or community-wide processes; and second, because of a long-held belief that urban populations are better-off, or even favored. But urban food insecurity is directly linked with the increase of urban poverty and inequality, and as such, research on the politics of urban food security in the 1990s must privilege the question of access: access not only to food, but access to political processes as well.

### 3. QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED BY CASE STUDIES

The preceding review raises a number of questions that can be addressed by two case studies:

1. Have problems of aggregate food supply to cities in Sub-Saharan Africa been resolved?
2. What has happened to real food prices over time? What happened to real income over the same period? What has happened to formal safety nets intended to protect the poor?
3. If the purchasing power of the urban poor has slipped badly (especially with regard to food prices), how have people responded? What sacrifices had to be made to prevent the slide in real income from being disastrous? What happened to livelihoods? What happened to household organization? What, in particular, happened to the labor allocation of women?
4. What has been the response of governments to the responses at the household level? What happens when the livelihood and survival activities of the urban poor run into direct conflict with the actions and policies that urban managers and national policymakers believe are necessary to improve infrastructure, attract investment, and lay the foundation for sustainable economic growth at the level of the city or the national economy as a whole?

5. In a resource-constrained era, when money for formal safety nets is unlikely to be broadly available, how can the strategies developed by low-income urban residents in the face of dropping real standards of living be supported, and when should they be? Can examples be found of “constructive reciprocities” between state/local government and civil society in urban Sub-Saharan Africa? Are there models of collaboration between national and municipal government, nongovernmental and community-based organizations, and local communities that meet the objectives of each of the parties?

These questions cut to the heart of the political economy of urban food security in the post-structural adjustment era. The remainder of the paper will take a brief look at these. The case studies that follow are intended to compare Kampala and Accra, but available data are uneven, so the cases may emphasize one example more than the other. In any case, they are intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive; and they are intended to help develop or sharpen the above questions as much as they are intended to answer them.

#### 4. CASE STUDIES FROM ACCRA AND KAMPALA

In this final section of the paper, the various questions posed in Section 3 are addressed, drawing on examples from Kampala and Accra. Some of this final section is based on a review of existing literature; part of it is based on the author's own unpublished fieldwork.

Focusing on only two cities is clearly insufficient to draw continental conclusions, and those drawn here are only intended as tentative and illustrative. There are some differences in cities resulting from colonial heritage (Anglophone/Francophone differences, for example) that will not emerge in this analysis. That said, however, Accra and Kampala offer an apt comparison. Uganda is landlocked, heavily dependent on agriculture, but with high rainfall and a relatively resilient agricultural resource base. Ghana is a coastal country, more heavily dependent on mineral exports, and with a less reliable agricultural base, especially in food crops. Yet for the purposes of examining urban food security, they offer an apt comparison: both suffered urban economic crises of epic proportions in the 1970s and 1980s, but for very different reasons: primarily the failure of post-independence development policies in Ghana, and the willful destruction of the economy by a predatory state in Uganda.

In both Accra and Kampala, urban population growth rates had been very high in the 1960s, but dropped off in the 1970s and slowed dramatically in the 1980s. Both countries agreed to structural adjustment programs early in the 1980s, and indeed, both have come to be regarded as model "adjustors" among African countries, registering

relatively impressive growth rates in the 1990s, though their experiences are quite different: Ghana has a more diversified export portfolio, dominated by minerals; Uganda is almost totally dependent on agriculture. In realization of the increased inequality resulting from the early shocks of adjustment, both countries implemented programs aimed at mitigating the most negative impacts of these shocks, and as such, both were early innovators in designing alternative safety nets in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup> Both of these programs were later scrapped, and in fact, represent the major, comprehensive attempts at this kind of alternative approach in Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Lastly, both countries have undergone a democratic transition, but again, with major structural differences: Ghana's was much more state-centered and top-down, and local council elections still have not taken place. Uganda's was much more grassroots-oriented and bottom-up, with elections determining control over the state not taking place until late 1996.

#### KAMPALA AND ACCRA: A SKETCHY COMPARISON

Although Accra has always had a larger population, Kampala and Accra both grew rapidly from the 1950s through the early 1970s. Population growth dropped dramatically in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. However, from the late 1980s into the 1990s, the rate of population growth picked up again—not yet reaching the levels of growth in the

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<sup>4</sup>PAMSCAD (Programme of Action to Mitigate the Social Costs of Adjustment) in the case of Ghana; PAPSCA (Programme to Alleviate Poverty and the Social Costs of Adjustment) in the case of Uganda.



1960s, but rates of growth are similar in both cities and are considerably higher than they were 10 years ago. These trends are depicted in Table 1.

The economy of Ghana spiraled downward for many years after 1965, culminating in the crises of 1977–79 and 1982–83. The immediate post-independence period was characterized by ambitious industrialization programs, but the neglect of smallholder agriculture. Ghana’s agrarian decline over the period from 1965 to 1983 is a classic textbook case of the failure of statist development policies: overvalued exchange rates and therefore implicit taxes on exports and agriculture, decaying infrastructure, falling production, declining investment levels, and hyperinflation (Kraus 1988; Commander, Howell, and Seini 1989). All of these gave rise to the *kalabule* system—hoarding of essential commodities, smuggling of exports and imports, embezzlement and corruption—and led to steady increases in the price of food and severe food shortages in

**Table 1 Population growth in Kampala and Accra**

|         | 1950   |                          | 1960   |             | 1970   |                   | 1980   |             | 1990   |             | 2000   |             |
|---------|--------|--------------------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------------|
|         | Size   | Growth rate <sup>a</sup> | Size   | Growth rate | Size   | Growth rate       | Size   | Growth rate | Size   | Growth rate | Size   | Growth rate |
|         | ('000) |                          | ('000) |             | ('000) |                   | ('000) |             | ('000) |             | ('000) |             |
| Kampala | 53     | 9.6                      | 137    | 9.6         | 340    | 12.0 <sup>b</sup> | 459    | 3.8         | 754    | 4.7         | 1,130  | 4.9         |
| Accra   | 250    | 4.5                      | 449    | 6.0         | 805    | 6.0               | 1,097  | 3.5         | 1,708  | 4.1         | 2,650  | 4.7         |

Source: Van Nostrand (1993) for Kampala; Ghana (1992) for Accra.

<sup>a</sup> Average annual growth rate (per cent per annum) for the ten-year period.

<sup>b</sup> 1970 growth rate figure for Kampala includes boundary reclassification.

urban areas. Popular protest against these food shortages and prices was directly linked to at least two coups, but the perceived villain was not so much government policy as it was food traders, and indeed, the most drastic actions taken by the government were not aimed at policy reform, but at the (mainly women) food traders in Accra; Makola market was bombed in 1979, destroying much of the distribution system based there.

The economic crisis came to a head in 1982–83 when a severe nationwide drought severely reduced harvests, triggering massive food shortages. At the depth of this crisis in Ghana, Nigeria expelled an estimated one million Ghanaian expatriates who had migrated to Nigeria during the economic boom of the latter. For many of the returnees, and for urban residents requiring supplementary income, there was little alternative to either rural agriculture or self-employment in the urban informal economy. Tabatabai (1988) notes, however, that while nutritional status declined severely nationwide, large-scale famine was avoided in both rural and urban areas. In cities, rural/urban transfers increased. Several other strategies emerged in the cities during this period, which Tabatabai classified as (1) a suffer/manage strategy, or the acceptance of a lowered standard of living; (2) an escape strategy, often involving migration outside of Ghana; (3) a “beat-the-system” strategy—the *kalabule* system already mentioned; and (4) a retreat into self-sufficient autarky. The first and second strategies applied to either urban or rural residents; the fourth applied mainly to rural populations, although there was a notable increase in subsistence farming in cities during this period. The third was largely an urban strategy, but it depended on the positions of individuals and their access to political favor. A

contemporary comparison of urban and rural incomes, prevalence of disease and malnutrition, access to basic services, and other indicators provide evidence that, on average, urban populations in Ghana are better-off than rural populations (World Bank 1995; Macro International 1994). However, these averages cover up growing poverty in Accra (World Bank 1995).

While the decline of the urban economy was a relatively slow-onset crisis in Accra, it occurred virtually over night in Kampala with the declaration of the “economic war of liberation” and the expulsion of the Indian merchant class by the Idi Amin regime in 1972. The formal economy rapidly collapsed, and deteriorated into a *magendo* or “black market” mode. A previously relatively privileged wage earning class rapidly declined as smuggling and illegal currency trade made a few individuals rich, but impoverished the majority of the urban population. Along with the economy, the tax base quickly eroded and, by 1973, the government was running major deficits, financed for the most part by printing money (Banugire 1987). Inflation ran at over 100 percent per year for several of the years in the late 1970s and 1980s. Rural-to-urban migration declined, but then sped up again with the outbreak of the guerilla war against the Obote government, and a scorched earth counter-insurgency response in the Luwero triangle to the northwest of the city from 1981-86. Some amount of political stability returned to the southern part of the country in 1986 with the advent of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government.

Structural adjustment policies were implemented unsuccessfully in the 1981-84 period by the Obote regime, and again from 1987 to the present by the NRM. By 1993,

inflation had been brought largely under control, and a modest, agriculture-led economic recovery was underway at the national level, and the World Bank declared the country well on its way toward “growing out of poverty” (World Bank 1993a). But the gains in macroeconomic performance had yet to be felt at the household level in the urban areas. Over 80 percent of the city’s work force was still to be found in the informal sector of the urban economy, and only about a quarter of these were entrepreneurs or self-employed; the rest were very low paid employees, or else unpaid family labor or apprentices (Ojja-Andira 1992). The differences between formal wage income and the cost of living was so great as to make calculations of purchasing power based on formal incomes laughable (Jamal 1988; Banugire 1987), and moonlighting and informal activities were the major sources of urban income (Chew 1990; Bigsten and Kayizzi-Mugerwa 1992). All these factors had considerable impact on the way in which households and individuals were forced to adapt.

#### URBAN FOOD SUPPLY

One of the major consequences of the prolonged economic decline in Ghana was food shortages in cities sparking incidents of urban political protest that escalated into full-scale riots in 1977. These were linked to at least two of the changes in government by military coups in the 1970s (Kraus 1988). Real food prices increased steadily throughout this period, but popular frustration with the price increase was focused on the urban distribution system—mostly market women—rather than on government policy. Food

prices climbed steadily in the decade up to 1982 at a real rate of nearly 3 percent per year (Tabatabai 1988) and climbed sharply during 1982-83, during a major, nationwide drought that marked the nadir of the economic crisis.

The Economic Recovery Programme (ERP)—the structural adjustment program for Ghana—began in 1983. Although oriented at macroeconomic policy and overall economic growth, one important component was the attempt to elicit a supply response from agriculture through increased incentives to production, and an important political rationale for the policy was the general urban dissatisfaction over the price and availability of food (Kraus 1988; Tabatabai 1988). Agriculture rebounded dramatically in 1984—maize and cassava production nearly tripled (Commander, Howell, and Seini 1989), although this was in part due to a very bad drought in 1983, and in part due to the fact that of the roughly one million returned migrants expelled from Nigeria, many had no choice but to return to farming. There was, therefore, both increased rainfall and increased labor in agriculture in 1984, in addition to changed policy.<sup>5</sup> Though Ghanaian agriculture remains weather-dependent and dominated by a single export crop (cocoa), food production has maintained steady, if less dramatic, growth since 1984 with the exception of generally bad crop years in 1990 and 1992 and 1994 (ISSER 1994, 1995). In spite of remaining problems in market infrastructure and transportation, supply response to price change seems to remain steady (Alderman and Higgins 1992). However, the

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<sup>5</sup>There was also a fair amount of movement of commodity trading from the “nonreported” category to the “reported” category, but this was an accounting change—it did not represent real growth.

increase in urban food supply is also partly a function of import liberalization, and heavy reliance on imported food, particularly rice, in urban areas (Levin 1995). Protests in response to prices or shortages have not been a political problem in urban areas in recent years, and while inflation has been high, the only vocal political protest over prices came in 1995 with the introduction of a value added tax, which was intended to raise revenue—it was not related to a supply problem.

Kampala sits squarely in the middle of its own agricultural hinterland, and its food supply *per se* has never really been a problem. One of the symptoms of the economic crisis was a heavy implicit tax on agricultural exports, maintained through control over export prices and exchange rates, which actually made it more lucrative for both rural producers and urban-based traders to turn their efforts to food crops during the 1970s and early 1980s. Kampala was always the major market for this production, and there were never major disruptions in supply with the exception of a relatively brief period during the civil war in 1985, when the city was cut off from most of its rural sources of food by the battle front. The issue in Kampala is more related to the low purchasing power of the urban poor.

Liberalization of agricultural markets has been a major component of structural adjustment in Uganda, particularly since 1990. Led by growth in production and domestic marketing of food crops, Ugandan agriculture has grown steadily in the early 1990s. This growth in agricultural output occurred in spite of the collapse of the international coffee

agreement in 1989 and a depressed world coffee market. Urban demand has been a significant stimulus for this agriculture-led recovery (World Bank 1993a).

To sum up trends in food supply, the structural adjustment era in both cities has seen few incidents of food shortage. Accra's food supply problems, in particular, are markedly fewer than in the 1964–1984 period.

#### URBAN FOOD PRICES, REAL INCOMES, POVERTY, AND FORMAL SAFETY NETS

Analysts have generally thought that food prices rose sharply in urban markets in the 1980s and 1990s, first as a result of both the decay of market infrastructure and production shortfalls, and second as a result of the policy impacts of liberalization. The latter was, in fact, an expected result of the dismantling of such “urban biased” practices as state control over markets, pan territorial pricing, etc., that dominated food policy in the prestructural adjustment era (Bryceson 1992). The available data are mixed, and difficult to analyze; a CPI deflator that is off by a single percentage point could make a significant difference in price trends over the period of time between the onset of the African urban economic crisis and the present, yet such deflators are routinely used in the analysis of food price data in economies where the rate of inflation may be in the range of 25–100 percent per year or higher, and highly variable—certainly both Uganda and Ghana fall into this category during much of the 1980s (ISSER 1996; World Bank 1993a). Several recent analyses have suggested that, in fact, the real food prices of urban consumers have *not* risen significantly because of market liberalization—that reductions in rent-seeking and

savings in the cost of transportation and marketing have kept real prices relatively stable even though farm incomes have increased.

Alderman and Shively (1996) make one such claim based on Ghana data. The change in real food prices, however, is a measure of whether the price of food increased relatively more rapidly or slowly than other commodities. The issue of access to food is dependent not only on real prices but also on real income. Here, Alderman and Shively note that “when minimum wages are used as the deflator [rather than the CPI] the trend [of food prices] is apparently significantly upward” (Alderman and Shively 1996, 528). They note that urban consumers—whether poor or middle class—are, on the whole, worse-off now than they were before, but via the income side, not on the price side. Alderman and Higgins (1992) show that, in general, the minimum wage purchased the least amount of food in Accra of any of the cities in Ghana for which they present data. Sarris (1993) notes that while the level of decline in urban wages was similar from 1977 to 1983 in the formal (private), public, and informal sectors, wages rebounded more quickly in the formal and public sectors after the initiation of the Economic Recovery Programme (structural adjustment) in 1983. Informal-sector wages increased briefly, then dropped again in real terms. Sarris concludes that the urban nonpoor have fared the best since the onset of the Economic Recovery Programme, implying a widening of the gap between the urban rich and the urban poor. Demery and Squire (1996) note that changes due to adjustment have been harder on the “old middle class” than on the “old poor.”



Table 2 is a comparison of the minimum wage with real prices as recorded in urban Ghana and Kampala. The minimum wage is not exclusively urban, but it does not apply to agricultural labor. The minimum wage is a somewhat more accurate indicator of actual income in Accra than it is in some other African cities, as witnessed by the fact that it continues to be set every year, and setting the minimum wage continues to generate political debate, though hardly political protest (Salia 1997). However, it must be stressed in relation to Table 2 that the minimum wage does not apply to the informal economy, and wage income is by no means total income among the urban poor. The Ghana figures in Table 2 are averages for all urban areas, not Accra-specific figures. The ratio of minimum wages to real prices was lower in Accra than in other urban areas, meaning that purchasing power in Accra was less than average (Alderman and Shively

**Table 2 Purchasing power: Wage/price comparison<sup>a</sup>**

|             | 1970 | 1972 | 1974 | 1976 | 1978 | 1980 | 1982 | 1984 | 1986 | 1988 | 1990 |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Urban Ghana | 100  | 103  | 149  | 74   | 39   | 22   | 19   | 18   | 34   | 35   | 49   |
| Kampala     | 100  | 100  | ...  | 32   | ...  | 5.4  | 7.2  | 8.1  | 5.4  | 6    | 10   |

Source: Jamal and Weeks (1993); ISSER (1995).

<sup>a</sup> Index of minimum wages compared with food prices. 1970 = 100.

1996). Third, these data indicate that things were, on average, at their worst from the late 1970s through 1990, and imply that things have gotten better since then. The point of

Table 2 is not to depict a drastic increase in urban poverty, but rather to present the limited evidence on the extent to which wage income fell and the changes necessitated in the household economy because of this fall. However, while *average* wage income has gone up since 1990 (ISSER 1995), Table 3 shows that the incidence of urban poverty has increased in Accra as well, implying increasing inequality. Table 3 depicts the proportion of the population below the poverty line in each of Ghana's main geographic areas and how much each area contributes to the total national poverty, for each round of the Ghana

**Table 3 Poverty level, by major area in Ghana**

| Area           | 1987/88            |                           | 1989  |              | 1992/93 |              |
|----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-------|--------------|---------|--------------|
|                | Index <sup>a</sup> | Contribution <sup>b</sup> | Index | Contribution | Index   | Contribution |
|                | (percent)          |                           |       |              |         |              |
| Accra          | 8.5                | 1.9                       | 21.9  | 4.7          | 23.0    | 6.0          |
| Other urban    | 33.4               | 23.5                      | 35.1  | 19.5         | 27.7    | 22.0         |
| Rural coastal  | 37.7               | 14.4                      | 44.6  | 16.5         | 28.6    | 12.9         |
| Rural forest   | 38.1               | 30.3                      | 41.9  | 30.3         | 33.0    | 31.0         |
| Rural savannah | 49.4               | 30.0                      | 54.8  | 29.0         | 38.3    | 28.1         |
| Ghana          | 36.9               | 100.0                     | 41.8  | 100.0        | 31.4    | 100.0        |

Source: World Bank (1995, 44).

<sup>a</sup> Proportion of population under the poverty line within the specified region.

<sup>b</sup> Proportion of national poverty.

Living Standards Survey (GLSS). The poverty line used to calculate the figures in Table 3 is taken as two-thirds of mean income, as measured by expenditure (World Bank 1995).

The first round of the GLSS showed the level of poverty to be relatively low in Accra. These data have been widely analyzed and published, and as recently as 1992, one prominent study noted that “poverty in Ghana is an overwhelmingly rural phenomenon...” (Boateng et al. 1992, 56). However, the data in Table 3 depict a rapid increase in poverty in Accra over recent years, even while, in general, it has been decreasing elsewhere in Ghana. A recent World Bank report on poverty in Ghana notes that, “against a general setting of economic recovery and growth, this . . . decline in living standards in Accra is a source of major concern” (World Bank 1995, 4). This decline indicated in GLSS data is backed up by a participatory assessment of poverty in Ghana (Norton et al. 1995).

The economic crisis of the late 1970s had effectively put an end to most of Ghana’s Independence era social safety nets—food transfers, consumer subsidies, and price controls. Employment insurance covered only workers in the formal sector, or an estimated 12 percent of the work force in 1970 (Gayi 1995). What little remained of these programs was scrapped in 1983 with the onset of the Economic Recovery Programme. By 1987, however, it was clear that the first phase of the ERP had resulted in rising unemployment, and an unequal burden in bearing the social costs of structural adjustment (Loxley 1990). Among the groups believed to be particularly hard hit were urban wage earners (Gayi 1995) and redeployed (laid off) civil servants (Alderman, Canagarajah, and Younger 1994). Under pressure from UNICEF and other donors, the Government of

Ghana and the World Bank launched the Programme of Action to Mitigate the Social Costs of Adjustment (PAMSCAD) in 1988. PAMSCAD ran for about six years, before being closed down in 1994. It was intended to assist both the “new poor”—particularly people who were put out of work by the ERP (mainly retrenched civil servants)—as well as the “chronic poor.”

While generally welcomed as representing an attempt at “adjustment with a human face,” the program was subject to intense political pressures and competing bureaucratic interests (Alderman 1994). PAMSCAD was not intended to be a program that would directly transfer food or money, but it was rather intended to create possibilities for employment or self-employment. In terms of programs, it included community initiatives, public works, infrastructural rehabilitation (these latter two often tied to each other), retraining programs, and small-scale credit. Though supposedly targeted, Gayi notes that little progress was made in identifying vulnerable groups, and very little was specifically targeted to women and children. In brief, PAMSCAD sought to put in place mechanisms by which the groups that were thought to be hit the hardest by structural adjustment could improve their lot. The program constituted an alternative approach to safety nets, intended as an alternative to “welfare” or providing direct transfers.

Ultimately, PAMSCAD was valued perhaps more by both the World Bank and the Ghanaian government for its “capacity to deflect opposition” to the ERP, than because of its intrinsic antipoverty capability:

The programme enabled the PNDC government to deflect political opposition at a time [1987] when it was most vulnerable, thereby ensuring not only its own survival but also that of the adjustment programme by arguing that PAMSCAD bears testimony to the government's commitment to alleviate the hardships of the poor and vulnerable during adjustment" (Gayi 1995, 81, 93–94).

Though the data for Kampala are not as extensive, a similar picture emerges from most analyses of Uganda as well. Most observers agree that real food prices increased steeply between 1986 and 1990 (World Bank 1993b; Mamdani 1990), but then leveled off in real terms, with only occasional spikes occurring. The major decline in standard of living was the drop in real income, particularly wage income. This general decline took place mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, as depicted in Table 2. Data in Table 2 suggest what other observers have made clear: In Kampala, the minimum wage quickly became rather irrelevant to the way in which urban wage earners actually made ends meet, and urban households had to rapidly diversify their sources of income in order to survive the fall in real wages (Bigsten and Kayizzi-Mugerwa 1992; Jamal and Weeks 1993). Data for trends in urban poverty in Kampala, comparable to those depicted in Table 3 for Accra, are not available. The World Bank (1993a) notes that average urban incomes have recently increased in Uganda, although this is almost certainly a class phenomenon, with most of the increased income going to a small urban business class. A program similar to

PAMSCA, PAPSCA, was run in Uganda, starting somewhat later and under somewhat different political circumstances, but with a similar rationale and program content.

To sum up, there is some debate about the magnitude of food price rises in African cities since structural adjustment. This may be, at least in part, because real food prices had already “adjusted” through alternative mechanisms prior to this period, and in part because marketing, transportation, and distribution systems have improved—and opportunities for “rent-seeking” have declined. There is less argument, however, that in Accra and Kampala, urban real incomes fell—particularly wage income. While average incomes have risen somewhat since then, unemployment has increased, and, at least in some cases, the incidence and depth of urban poverty has increased, exacerbating urban inequalities.

In recognition of this fact, and in fear of the potential political consequences, alternative approaches to poverty alleviation have been attempted by national governments and donors, often in collaboration with nongovernmental organizations. These programs are not strictly urban programs, but have had significant urban content. However, these new approaches, even while being run by governments, have de-emphasized the role of the state in protecting the vulnerable, tending to make the individual household or wage earner the locus of programs, through such means as training, credit, and self-help initiatives, with very few targeted programs, virtually no food subsidies, and no insurance or transfer programs whatsoever.

These trends have several implications. First, average real urban income (and therefore “welfare”) is going up at the same time that a greater proportion of urban residents are falling into poverty. But the comparison of averages still indicates that rural poverty is more prevalent, and thus provides ongoing rationale for policies that are generally not oriented at reducing *urban* poverty (and therefore continuing the trend of making urban food insecurity relatively invisible). Second, to the extent that the rise in urban poverty does present a political problem, the programs designed to alleviate poverty have tended to emphasize individual-based responses, rather than “safety nets” in the traditional sense of the word. However, these individually-based strategies have been on the terms that the state itself has set. The next section will review the response to these changes at the household level.

#### THE RESPONSE: CHANGES IN LIVELIHOODS AND THE HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY

In the case of both Accra and Kampala, the major response at the level of the household to the urban economic crisis and the ensuing policies of structural adjustment has been the imperative to diversify income sources in the face of declining real income (Brydon and Legge 1996; Jamal and Weeks 1993; Bigsten and Kayizzi-Mugerwa 1992). The major redeployment of civil servants beginning in the late 1980s has led to concern over the fate of the old middle class in Accra, the extent to which they have fallen into poverty, and how they have been able to cope. Alternative means of employment in the formal sector have not by any means kept pace with the redeployments and increase in the

urban labor force, leaving most job-seekers no alternative to the informal economy, and the number of workers in the urban informal sector has mushroomed (ISSER 1995).

Reliance on the informal economy is not new in Accra—indeed, Accra was the site of Keith Hart’s seminal research that invented the term “informal sector” (Hart 1973). However, the informal economy plays an ever increasing role in the livelihoods of the urban poor. While some informal sector livelihoods are in small-scale manufacturing and services, most are in the petty retail and service sector—either itinerant hawking (mostly men), or street and market vending (mostly women). Urban retail marketing and petty trading are sectors that have long been dominated by women in West Africa, so it is not surprising to note that these are the most common forms of female livelihoods in Accra. Street food preparation and vending—long a women’s occupation—has also increased in recent years. Street foods, in fact, play an increasingly important role in urban food security in terms of livelihoods, consumption, and coping strategies. With the exception of petty trading, street food preparation and vending is the most common form of female livelihoods in Accra, providing a major source of income for women. Street foods constitute a major part of urban food consumption by nearly all groups—and a very high proportion of consumption in some cases—and also provide a coping mechanism for very low-income households (Ga Mashie Study Team 1996; Bortei-Doku Aryeetey and Aryeetey 1996).

There is significant, though anecdotal, evidence of increasing involution in the informal economy of Accra—the increased “crowding in” of more economic actors into a



market that is not growing nearly as rapidly, implying that the limits of this sector to continue to absorb labor may have already been reached. In 1980, the ratio of workers in the informal sector of the Ghanaian economy to workers in the formal sector was 2:1. By 1990, the ratio was 5:1 (ISSER 1995), and the ratio has apparently grown since 1990. Case studies conducted among low-income households in Accra in 1996 indicated a declining profit margin in enterprises that had been sustained, and also indicated a kind of “downshifting” between enterprises: individuals who had previously been larger-scale had gone bankrupt, and were only able to resume on a smaller scale with smaller stock and working capital, or in a less lucrative market—from preparing food to selling raw food, for example.

A variety of other coping strategies have been noted for low-income groups in Accra (Ga Mashie Study Team 1996), which fall into several categories: income-related strategies (diversification, circulatory and short-term migration, casual labor, and heavy reliance on remittances from family members); income pooling (either at the household or family compound level, or through *susu* savings groups); expenditure-reduction strategies (cutting expenditure on housing, health, and education); consumption reducing or rationing strategies (dietary change, rationing, maternal buffering, reduction of consumption, and reliance on street foods); the commercialization of ritual ceremonies; distress sales of personal effects; and increased petty criminal or antisocial activities (prostitution, petty crime, and the abandonment of spouses and children).

In Kampala, the most significant impact of the crisis of the formal economy on the urban household was the drastic decline in real income from formal wages. This decline has been depicted dramatically by Jamal and Weeks (1993) and is reproduced in Table 2. The responses at the household level to this massive decline in real income from wages have been characterized in various ways, but, in general, can be described as the diversification of income sources and the informalization of work (Bigsten and Kayizzi-Mugerwa 1992; Jamal and Weeks 1993; Banugire 1987; Obbo 1991). However, this general trend has taken many forms.

The first of these was the dramatically increased participation of urban women in income-generating activities (Obbo 1991; Basirika 1992; Manyire 1993). Much of this activity has been in the form of small-scale, informal trading and in the preparation and sale of food. The second, partly overlapping with the first, was vastly increased proportions of the population engaged in small-scale manufacturing, informal trade, or informal delivery of services, given the extent to which municipal infrastructure had broken down. Much of this activity constituted a second or third source of income at the household or even individual level.

A third category of responses was linked largely to the high cost of food in the city. These included making changes in the basic diet of the urban population, mostly substituting cassava or grains for more expensive plantains, and strengthening linkages with rural kin, trading services for food (Jamal and Weeks 1993; Obbo 1991). Also related to the high cost of food in the city, urban residents and, in particular, urban women

increasingly used small parcels of land in the city for agricultural production. Jamal notes that “the culmination of these. . .changes was that after the mid-1970s, the distinct classes that had existed in Uganda in the 1960s coalesced into a grand trader-cum-wage earner-cum-*shamba*-growing class” (Jamal 1985, 37).<sup>6</sup> A 1993 survey in Kampala found one-third of households engaged in some form of urban agriculture, primarily as a food security strategy, and that children in such households were significantly less malnourished (Maxwell 1995).

Another response to the changed economic circumstances involved direct participation in illegal activities. For self-evident reasons, there is little research on this topic. Clearly, for a small portion of the urban population, immense fortunes were amassed through illegal means. A somewhat larger group benefitted to some extent from the spoils of the *magendo* economy. However, for the majority, the most significant impact of the *magendo* economy was impoverishment (Green 1981). Recent evidence suggests that some of the improvements in macroeconomic indicators have begun to trickle down to the household level. Jamal and Weeks' latest figures, for instance, show that by 1990 real wages had climbed to 10 percent of their 1972 levels, compared with only 6 percent in 1988. The World Bank (1993a) claims that more significant improvements have taken place in the urban household economy but does not present substantiating evidence. For the vast majority of Kampala residents, however, meeting

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<sup>6</sup>*Shamba* literally means "garden" in Swahili.

daily needs continues to be, at best, a demanding task, and more often, as characterized by Banugire, a "continuous struggle for survival" (Banugire 1987, 137).

To sum up, the major response at the household level to the urban economic crisis has been the diversification of income-generating strategies, and a variety of coping strategies. Research on coping strategies in rural areas has recognized distinct patterns in coping strategies, and some (Watts 1988; Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992) have even noted relationships between thresholds of vulnerability and patterns of coping. However, urban livelihoods and coping strategies are less well understood, and remain a topic for further research. The reactions of the state and local government to these strategies developed by individuals and households are reviewed in the next section.

#### THE RESPONSE TO THE RESPONSE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF URBAN COPING AND ADAPTATION

From the point of view of planners, many of the activities in which the urban poor are engaged to make ends meet (and much of the informal service sector) have extremely low productivity. The challenge for public policy is to facilitate increases in productivity in these activities, but often the response is to attempt to eradicate these activities, or at least push them out of the congested centers of cities. Street traders, for example, are often forcefully chased out of downtown areas in special operations, only to return as soon as the "operation" is completed. Street foods are viewed by urban authorities as a health hazard, as having low nutritional value, and, as always, a form of commerce

difficult to tax and a nuisance on the streets (Atkinson 1995; Tinker 1987). Urban agriculture, urban officials contend, lends a “bushy” appearance to cities.

Some of these forms of economic activity also run counter to the interests of the formal business community, which dislikes the crowding and the lower priced items for sale on the street in front of their shops by hawkers who have lower overhead costs. From the perspective of urban managers and planners, these activities are in direct confrontation to initiatives to clean up cities, raise revenues, and attempts to attract investment. Also, many of these activities are space-intensive occupations, and depend on informal relations over access to land. But the land base of municipalities represents its most important source of revenues; informal (and therefore untaxed) access to land remains a major problem for urban managers struggling with demands on services that vastly outstrip financial resources for financing those services.

As a result, these forms of livelihood inevitably bring about conflicts with city managers, who face pressures from business community, from the state, from demands on municipal services, and from their own perception of what constitutes a city. Hence, the livelihood options of last resort for the urban poor run into direct confrontation with city managers. In Accra, the most evident form of these confrontations is the C4 Unit of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (Ga Mashie Study Team 1996). This unit is charged with keeping the streets in the central business district clear of street vendors and itinerant hawkers, and has been particularly in evidence at certain important times (such as during the PANAFEST festival in 1994) when city managers want to present a “modern” image

of the city. While confrontations between city councils and the informal sector are not new news in any city, a different kind of example of the response of government to urban livelihood strategies comes from Kampala.

In terms of access to food, a common response to the economic crisis across Africa has been a resurgence of household-based agricultural production within cities; 15–50 percent of urban populations in Africa today engage in some form of agricultural production *within* the city (Egziabher et al. 1994; Rogerson 1993; Freeman 1991; Maxwell and Zziwa 1992; Lee-Smith et al. 1987). Kampala provides a classic example where urban agriculture is a subsistence strategy, largely under the control of women who not only directly produce food, but who are also responsible for the purchase and preparation of food for their households. Data from Kampala indicate that urban agriculture is thus both an important source of food production, and an important means of access to food for low-income groups who have some access to land (Maxwell 1995). In Kampala, urban agriculture has been a major factor in mitigating the decline in nutritional status among the low-income urban group, and is one of the means by which people have weathered the economic crisis (Jamal 1985).

Such information could be suggested to policymakers as sufficient evidence of the importance of urban agriculture in alleviating some of the worst effects of the urban economic crisis and the impact of structural adjustment policies on the urban poor. City managers in Kampala were long opposed to the practice, and crop-slashing operations and other forms of harassment were common in the 1970s and 1980s. Grassroots political

pressures in the 1990s eventually changed the view of some urban managers, and urban agriculture is now at least widely tolerated and, in some cases, actively embraced.

However, resistance to support for urban agriculture comes from an unexpected quarter: national agricultural policymakers.

Like most other African countries, Uganda has adopted an agriculture-led economic recovery program under the aegis of structural adjustment, and the liberalization of agricultural markets is a key aspect of the program. However, while there is major emphasis on export crops to redress balance of payments deficits, only 5 percent of agricultural output is (officially) exported. Some 57 percent is reported to be consumed by the household of the producer; the remainder is primarily food that is sold on the domestic market (World Bank 1993b). The main source of farm income now consists of the sales of food crops and dairy products to primarily urban markets, rather than the traditional export crops that farmers sold in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of the switch to food crops took place in the 1970s and early 1980s, when exports were subject to heavy indirect taxation, but domestic food trade largely evaded state control (Whyte 1988). With regard to Uganda, the World Bank notes, "One consequence of having food as the engine of agricultural growth is the dependence on the growth in domestic [urban] demand for continued impetus" (World Bank 1993b, 130).

This gives rise to the objection of agricultural policymakers about urban agriculture: urban agriculture is explicitly a strategy that arose outside the realm of planning or state control to secure a nonmarket source of food as a protection mechanism of urban

consumers against the high cost of living, particularly the high cost of food. As such, agricultural planners fear that any state or municipal support for such a source of food will have the effect of dampening urban demand for food produced in rural areas, thereby undermining the fragile agricultural recovery (Belshaw 1994). The more important urban agriculture is demonstrated to be in protecting the food security and nutritional status of the large urban low-income group—in other words, the greater its importance as a strategy to adapt to difficult circumstances, the more strenuous this objection to urban agriculture becomes. The only way to protect the food security of the urban poor, the argument continues, is to stimulate greater rural production through higher producer prices, although this inevitably means higher food prices for consumers in the short term (World Bank 1993b).<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, this line of argument runs counter to that of Jamal and Weeks (1993) about the locus of poverty in Uganda, and the issue is one that requires further research.

But somewhat irrespective of the debate over urban and rural priorities, Bates' (1981) original argument about the political foundations of state action in economic policy is still largely valid. While donor conditionality has undoubtedly been the major factor pushing African states toward market liberalization and agriculture-led economic recovery, a complete analysis would have to take into account domestic politics as well, particularly the politics of survival and the potential for violent political protest among the

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<sup>7</sup>Note that this argument still defines urban food security in terms of aggregate supply, not access.



volatile urban wage earning groups with whom Bates (1981), and Walton and Seddon (1994) were concerned.

The World Bank (1993b) shows a steep increase in urban food prices in Uganda as a direct result of devaluation and liberalization during 1987-90. If anything, the fact that urban incomes and standards of living had declined so dramatically prior to this period would have been expected to make these price increases even tougher for the urban populace (and electorate) to swallow. Yet, unlike other countries that have witnessed violent urban political protest in response to steep increases in prices of food and other basic needs, these changes in Kampala provoked little political protest, and did nothing to threaten either the stability of the government or its ability to implement adjustment policies. The main explanation is that a variety of informal economic strategies that arose completely outside the realm of state planning had insulated a sizable proportion of Kampala's population from the worst impacts of both the economic crisis, and structural adjustment and agricultural market liberalization, and hence actually *helped* to create a political environment that permitted liberalization policies to take root. Regarding the manner in which agricultural marketing reforms were introduced in Tanzania, Bryceson (1992) makes a similar argument about urban farming in Dar es Salaam. Tripp (1997) makes virtually the same argument, albeit with regard to the informal economy more generally, and not to urban agriculture in particular.

The specific conclusion to be drawn from this example is that the poorly understood—and often actively suppressed—coping mechanisms of the urban low-income

groups in Kampala have created political circumstances under which governments have been able to implement structural adjustment policies, both in agriculture and in broader macroeconomic policy. Yet this point was totally missed by agricultural policymakers, and is often missed by urban managers, policymakers and political leaders, who continue to suppress the economic activities of the urban poor. The more general point is that, unless policy-makers and political leaders adequately understand the livelihood strategies of both the rural *and* urban poor, political coalitions that embrace mutual interests of both groups cannot be built. Where these linkages are understood, broad-based political coalitions can hasten the pace of economic reform and change to the advantage of both groups (Tripp 1997).

This is *not* to argue—as some have argued—that what happened with urban agriculture in Kampala, or even with diversified urban livelihoods in the informal economy more generally, is necessarily a positive thing. First, they imply the shifting of responsibility for bearing the costs of economic adjustment from the state or other employers to the poor themselves. In the era of structural adjustment, and PAMSCAD-like programs of poverty alleviation, it is fairly easy to argue that the state has long since shed responsibility for protecting the poor,<sup>8</sup> but under the circumstances, if the urban poor have developed their own strategies for adapting to their situation, state and municipal governments could do more to support them. Second, household-level coping strategies

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<sup>8</sup>Recent World Bank documents, in fact, refer not to poverty *alleviation* any more, but rather to poverty *reduction*—stressing even more the emphasis on growth rather than welfare in terms of poverty programs.

tend to make the problems of urban food security more invisible by atomizing the response to the problems. In other words, once diversified livelihood strategies—such as urban agriculture, and the other strategies reviewed in this paper—became the locus of combating the decline in urban standards of living, the potential for collective political action was significantly reduced. City action against farmers—in the form of crop-slashing operations—was one of the few politicizing forces in urban food security issues in Kampala in the 1980s, but city officials quickly learned to turn a blind eye to most people’s farming activities precisely to avoid turning it into a political problem. The net effect, however, is that circumstances have forced people into informal livelihood strategies that are misunderstood, neglected, and sometimes actively suppressed.

#### STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE INFORMAL ECONOMY: SCOPE FOR COOPERATION?

In Accra, despite apparent good will at the top level of city administration, a *modus vivendi* between the city and the “objectionable” elements of the informal economy—especially the street vendors and hawkers—has yet to be worked out, and tension is high between the city, the street traders, and more established market vendors and shop owners. The C4 Unit has been pulled from the streets, but the political pressures remain (Aforo 1997). In Kampala, a different story emerged, although the story is far from complete.

In Kampala, informal hawkers had a constant battle on the streets with the police and the municipal authorities throughout the 1980s that came to a head with the

Resistance Council elections in January 1989. The entire elected leadership of the city, including the mayor, had to be reelected to their most localized council, which served as the electoral college in the selecting leaders for the next highest level. Given the chaotic circumstances of the city at the time, it was not possible to prove residency, so people were permitted to vote in local council elections wherever they preferred—the assumption being that people would naturally prefer to vote in the area where they lived in order to have some influence over local leadership selection. All the local elections were held at the same time, so it was not possible to vote in more than one place. In any event, however, a large number of the city's hawkers went to vote in the local council elections where the mayor had to be reelected. There were nine seats on the local council, of which the mayor was eligible for eight (he was barred from running for the position of Secretary for Women's Affairs because he was a man). For each of the eight times he tried to get himself elected to the local council (after which his return to the mayor's job via the electoral college was a virtual foregone conclusion), the hawkers voted for whoever was running against him, and he was not reelected at all.

The hawkers had their revenge. Shortly thereafter, the newly elected mayor met with the fledgling hawker's association. Over the course of the following months, an agreement was hammered out whereby the hawker's association would be legally recognized by the city, and it would issue a yellow jacket and a numbered badge to all its members. It would sell licenses to each member for about \$15 per year, which would permit the hawker to go where the *association* permitted. The association would pay the

Kampala City Council about \$10 of the licence fee, and could keep the rest. The association would police both the areas of sales for members, and the activities of nonmembers. Hawkers were pleased with the arrangement—they were finally permitted to do their business without having to bribe the police and City Council security guards; the business community was somewhat mollified because at least the practice was orderly, and somewhat reduced; Kampala City Council was happy to have the revenue that actually made it into the coffers. The only real "losers" in the event were the individual police and KCC security staff who had been supplementing their income through informal "rent-seeking," but there were plenty of other targets for this activity. Virtually overnight, street sales in the downtown areas were transformed. The battle of the city authorities and the informal trade sector continued, but in a different arena: the so-called night markets (Gombay 1993).

In this and many other ways, the Resistance Council system created new political space in which informal economic actors can negotiate with and address grievances to local government. Through these channels, many economic activities that were previously subject to state or municipal harassment have been recognized as legitimate and, in many cases, granted legal protection. The informal economy was long viewed as the means by which civil society disengaged from the state (Lemarchand 1991; MacGaffey 1988; Hyden 1983). More recent work, however, analyzes informal economic activities as a challenge to the existing political and economic order—a challenge that has, in many cases, successfully "changed the rules" of urban economic life (Tripp 1997). The debate over

state/civil society relations in Africa has recently been concerned with the twin pressures of economic liberalization and political liberalization, or more precisely, whether steps toward the democratization of political processes can withstand the pressures of economic restructuring (Mamdani 1990; Widner 1994; Young 1994). By creating political space for the legitimization of informal economic activities that have blunted some of the negative impacts of the economic crisis and the liberalization policies designed to resolve the crisis, even though those activities were not planned or even condoned by the state, the Resistance Council system has opened possibilities for "constructive reciprocities" (Hyden 1992) between the government and the governed. The impact of this kind of change on food security has certainly never been directly measured. But the general argument advanced here is that improving the circumstances under which the urban poor earn their livelihoods will result in an increased ability to gain access to basic needs, of which food is by far the greatest proportion of the budget of this group.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that the nature of urban food insecurity has changed markedly over the past 25 years. In the 1970s and 1980s, urban food security was defined as the problem of "feeding the cities," or maintaining the aggregate food supply. Protest resulting from such problems commanded political attention. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the problems of failure in supply and major price swings have been much less common. But urban food insecurity in terms of access at the household or individual level has

increased as urban poverty and inequality have increased. Under circumstances where low-income urban populations are spending up to three quarters of their total income on food, the issues of income and livelihood are directly linked to food security. In the earlier era, urban food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa was characterized by short-term, acute problems that tended to be experienced by a broad cross-section of the urban population. In the 1990s, urban food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa is less characterized by acute crises, but has become a chronic problem experienced mainly by the poor.

However, the responses of urban households and populations to the economic crisis, and the response of governments to the policy conditionalities of structural adjustment, have both contributed to a set of circumstances in contemporary urban Africa where the individual and the household, and sometimes the extended family—but not the state—are the locus of efforts to combat poverty and food insecurity. People are not passive victims of food insecurity, or altered economic circumstances. Within the constraints they face, people do their best to cope, to make ends meet, to protect their livelihoods, and to gain access to sufficient food and other basic requirements. To a small extent, these efforts may have the backing or financial support of the state or local government, but by and large, they are the efforts of the individuals and households themselves, and may be misunderstood, neglected, or suppressed by governments. Political pressure, or in the extreme case, political protest, tends to occur only when a large proportion of the population is simultaneously and negatively affected by a food problem, or when a self-conscious group (such as retrenched civil servants) or a livelihood

group (such as the hawkers association) is similarly affected. But the tendency toward household-level responses of coping and adaptation has tended to atomize and muffle political expression, and the net effect has been the depoliticization of urban food insecurity problems, even at a time when the scanty evidence available suggests that poverty-induced food insecurity in cities is increasing.

Traditional safety net programs were often not very well targeted to the poor, and the remnants of these programs were usually scrapped by structural adjustment. Alternative formal programs such as PAMSCAD emphasized individual-centered approaches to the problem of poverty, such as training, credit, and other self-help mechanisms. But the impact of these formal programs has been small—the major factor mitigating the increase in urban poverty and food insecurity has been the unplanned and usually informal livelihoods and coping strategies of low-income urban groups. In a resource-constrained era, when formal safety nets are often too expensive to be financed from public coffers, the role of cities, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and other development agencies could be to identify and support those strategies that offer some basis for sustained economic improvement. The argument here has been that policymakers and political leaders must understand the way in which the urban poor organize themselves to gain access to basic requirements—of which food is by far the most demanding—in order to understand and intervene in urban poverty. As Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991) suggests, urban policy should be encouraged to improve upon, not suppress, informal economic activities.



In conclusion, several speculative points can be suggested about what would be required for this change to take place. First, at the national level, these changes would require a reexamination of the nature of the debate over poverty from rural/urban comparisons of means to an examination of poverty, inequality, and food insecurity without regard to location. That is to say, it will require taking another look at presumptions about “urban bias.” Second, it will require a changed understanding of the nature of urban food insecurity by both urban managers and national policymakers—there is considerable evidence that urban food security is still viewed largely in terms of aggregate food supply, whereas in the post-adjustment era, the more critical issue is access to food, not aggregate supply. Third, it will require a much greater understanding of the livelihoods of the urban poor. An extended entitlements approach or livelihood security approach has been suggested to help understand the link between urban livelihoods and food security. Coping strategies are an important element of this link, but patterns of coping are highly individualistic and still only poorly understood. Fourth, and perhaps most important, it will require the incorporation of these issues into the political agenda of cities and urban communities, which, in turn, requires the creation of political space at the local and municipal level that will enhance, rather than muffle, the debate over the causes, consequences, and responses to the current circumstances of poverty and food insecurity in contemporary urban Africa.

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