

Diversity of the Food System in Urban Areas: An innovative Locally- Driven Approach

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Introduction

In Cameroon, rapid urbanization has profoundly transformed urban food systems. This has led to a diversification of consumption patterns. In large metropolises such as Douala and Yaoundé, poor households depend mainly on food purchases from markets to meet their consumption needs ([Reliefweb, 2024](#)). Urban agriculture, particularly market gardening, plays a crucial role in supplying fresh produce to city dwellers.

However, this diversification poses [several challenges](#), including dependence on processed products, limited access to nutritious food for vulnerable populations, and increasing food waste. In addition, [inequalities persist between major metropolises and secondary towns](#), with the latter having lower incomes and limited access to adequate food infrastructures.

Faced with these challenges, innovative approaches to the food system are being explored, incorporating concepts such as [the circular economy and urban and peri-urban agriculture](#). These strategies aim to strengthen links between urban and rural areas, promote local production and encourage sustainable consumption practices.

This brief examines the current state of the urban food system in Cameroon and possible solutions.

1. State of the Urban Food System in Cameroon

1.1. General Characteristics of the Food System in Cameroon

The urban food system is influenced [by various cultural, environmental and socio-economic factors](#). Urban food depends first and foremost on products that are directly accessible for consumption. [This is particularly true of rice](#), which is the staple of most Cameroonian urban diets. This preponderance of rice is somewhat varies depending on the urban area in which one finds oneself in Cameroon. [Foods such as sorghum account for a high proportion of the diet in urban areas in the north of the country, and Maize in the western part](#). In addition, [some city dwellers engage in market gardening or urban agriculture](#). This involves the production and sale of foodstuffs for direct consumption by the local population.

1.2. Specific Urban Challenges

Urban food supply is highly dependent on the combination of certain elements that are essential to meeting the food needs of urban populations. [Urban demographics must be taken into account to protect urban areas from the risks of food insecurity.](#) A growing population puts sustained pressure on already fragile urban food systems. Another key challenge is to improve access to food resources, especially for vulnerable urban populations. [The latter sometimes have fairly limited access to healthy, nutritious food.](#) It is essential that this segment of society also has access to good food. Growing urbanization is also having an impact on changing people's eating habits. This progressive trend [towards fast food and processed foods can be detrimental to public health.](#)

1.3.Factors Influencing Diversity

Urban food in Cameroon is as diverse as its population. Urban centers are veritable food melting pots. As a result, several factors tend to influence Cameroon's urban food system. Firstly, [agro-ecological diversity is a determining factor in the diet of any population.](#) Urban populations primarily consume locally produced food. What's more, [the significant impact of food cultures and traditions significantly shape a population's eating habits.](#) In addition, the availability of food resources often determines the diet of any given population. Last but not least, [the effects of climate change are substantially modifying people's diets.](#)

2. Innovative Local Solutions to Support Food Diversity?

2.1.Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture

Peri-urban agriculture plays a crucial role in supplying cities with perishable products such as vegetables, traditional leaves and lettuce, as well as products that require significant transport, such as fresh cassava and certain fruits ([Bopda & Awon, 2010](#)). This leads to indirect environmental benefits, such as reduced pressure on forest margins and thus reduced deforestation caused by shifting cultivation over fire ([Dauvergne, 2011](#)). Despite these advantages, peri-urban agriculture faces many difficulties, such as disease and pests, lack of credit and ineffective extension services.

Peri-urban agriculture also serves to mark out spaces and secure land. Since land appropriation systems are fragile and ethno-tribal-based, the cultivation of undeveloped urban spaces is more controlled, leading to sustainable and transparent urban development. For example, renting land only allows seasonal crops such as market gardening, whereas perennial crops herald definitive appropriation ([Yemmafouo, 2007](#)).

2.2. Adding Value to Local Produce and Promoting Food Diversity

Intensive and semi-intensive poultry and pig farming play an important role in supplying towns and cities. The marketing of traditional leafy vegetables and fresh cassava provides jobs for at least four thousand women ([Bopda et al, 2010](#)). Similarly, poultry and pig production is an important source of income for a large part of the urban population. Production systems using organic and chemical fertilizers have been developed for traditional leafy vegetables and lettuce in the lowlands during the dry season. The abundance of labor, the availability of land and the proximity of markets for agricultural inputs and products have all contributed to this process of intensification. Trade fairs are being set up to promote and facilitate access to local products and create a stable Mache for citizens. In Douala, the fourth edition of the Salon Urbain created opportunities [for over 200 entrepreneurs and served more than 200,000 city residents](#). In Yaoundé, the National Organic and Agroecological Products Fair opened [on November 18, 2024 at the Boulevard du 20 mai esplanade and continues to welcome visitors from Yaoundé](#). Thanks to changes in accessible technology, E-commerce is set to play an important role in facilitating access to peri-urban products.

2.3. Short Distribution Channels and Local Markets

Short distribution channels and local markets are essential for promoting food diversity in urban areas. These circuits, characterized by a reduction in the number of intermediaries between producers and consumers, facilitate access to fresh, local produce, while supporting the local economy ([Ugaglia et al, 2020](#)).

Urban markets, such as those in [Douala and Yaoundé, are supplied by peri-urban and rural production areas](#). This proximity encourages the emergence of producer-led market organizations, strengthening the links between local production and consumption.

Short distribution channels are particularly well-suited to the marketing of perishable products such as vegetables, fruit and local milk. [In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, this type of circuit is predominant for these products, guaranteeing their freshness and quality](#). But better structuring of marketing circuits, including collection, supply and transit stages, is needed to optimize the efficiency of these short circuits.

2.4. Use of New Technologies and Digital Innovation

In our rapidly urbanizing metropolises, the integration of new technologies and digital innovation is emerging and reconfiguring urban food systems and landscapes. This dynamic is improving the efficiency of food production and distribution, while at the same time fostering greater diversity of food supply to meet the varied needs of city dwellers ([Macé-Le Ficher P. 2023](#); [Lemeilleur, S. et al., 2020](#)). This is reflected in the advent of digital platforms that facilitate connections between local producers and consumers, reducing intermediaries and promoting shorter supply circuits. Similarly, mobile applications offer consumers access to fresh local produce. [Examples include E-Farm and Buyam, Marashopping and Wissbuy.](#)

Recommendations

- Given the impact of new technologies and digital innovation on the diversity of the urban food system, it is crucial that there is institutional support to accelerate the adoption and dissemination of these new technologies, particularly in terms of acquisition and training costs.
- It is essential to multiply solid partnerships between the public and private sectors, and to implement supportive policies and incentives that promote initiatives such as collaborative cooking sessions and urban gardens supported by digital tools and that enable citizens to become directly involved in food production (Morales, 2023). These projects not only promote access to diversified food, but also strengthen community ties while informing and raising awareness among populations of various issues of an environmental nature, nutritional quality, green jobs or even public health.

Conclusion

Rapid urbanization has shifted consumer habits towards greater dependence on processed products. It has highlighted the importance of urban and peri-urban agriculture for the supply of fresh produce. Short circuits and local markets also play an important role in promoting food diversity and supporting local economies, but need to be better structured to effectively meet the needs of urban populations.

Innovative solutions, such as adding value to local products, developing e-commerce and adopting digital technologies, offer prospects for improving the sustainability and accessibility of urban food systems. Through these solutions, Cameroon can strengthen the resilience of its food systems in the face of economic, social and environmental challenges.

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