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Urbanization and dietary change

Sub-Saharan Africa still evokes images of undernourished children in poor farming villages. And indeed, this is a region where one in every three children under 5 is stunted in their growth and in danger of irreversible physical and cognitive damage. As recently as 2017, parts of South-Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria experienced episodes of famine.

However, the region is changing rapidly. While still mostly rural today, sub-Saharan Africa is the fastest urbanizing region in the world. The share of population living in urban areas rose from less than 15% in 1960 to nearly 39% in 2015 and is projected to reach 58% by 2050. At the same time the total population in Africa is growing, making for an even more impressive increase. As can be seen on the infographic below, the absolute number of people living in urban areas in Africa will almost triple over the next 30 years.

This shift toward urban living is often put forward as an explanation for changing diets in the region. That is, traditional African staple foods such as maize, sorghum, cassava and pulses are increasingly complemented with and substituted by more processed food items, often with higher levels of sugar and fat. As such, urbanization is commonly linked to increasing rates of overweight and obesity. While undernutrition remains a major public health problem in sub-Saharan Africa, 39% of adult women in Africa were estimated to be overweight and sub-Saharan Africa was home to 6.4 million overweight children in 2017.

Lara Cockx

LICOS - Centre for Institutions and
Economic Performance
lara.cockx@kuleuven.be

Liesbeth Colen

Joint Research Centre of the European
Commission (JRC)
liesbeth.colen@ec.europa.eu

Joachim De Weerd

Institute of Development Policy,
University of Antwerp
joachim.deweerd@uantwerpen.be

RURAL-URBAN POPULATION 1950-2050 IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



Urbanization as a driving factor... but is it really?

Why should we care whether or not diets are changing and what is driving it? For authorities, understanding where, how and why people are eating differently is crucial to design agricultural, trade, food and public health policies that help to produce nutritious foods, to identify public health needs, and to end all forms of malnutrition. For the private sector, understanding what is driving current consumer demand helps them predict future demand.

Our study aims to understand what role urban growth is playing in changing diets. Data from Tanzania confirms the clear divide between those living in rural areas and those in cities when it comes to diets and nutrition. It is therefore understandable that many observers have linked the trends in nutrition to the ongoing urbanization process as the infographic below shows.

But is it really urbanization explaining these trends, or are other factors at play? Although the urbanization trend is unmistakable, Africa is also getting richer, and globalization is exposing Africans to new food items and eating cultures. Such changes are happening concurrently with urbanization and all these factors influence and shape each other and have an effect on nutrition.

Explaining changing diets

For our study, we had access to unique data from Tanzania that tracks individuals as they move from rural to urban areas. We had detailed information on people's eating patterns, on how their income changed, on which jobs they did and which prices they faced, both before and after they moved to the city. By comparing them to those who did not move, we were able to capture how the rural or urban context in which one lives, affects their diet.

As the infographic shows, there is a clear change in diet when one moves from a rural area to towns or cities. More specifically, moving to an urban



area in Tanzania is associated with decreased consumption of traditional staple foods such as maize and cassava. The consumption of high sugar foods such as sweets, pastries and soft drinks then again rises. We also noted a significant increase in the consumption of bread, rice and pasta. And most notably, those who move from rural to urban areas start eating away from home much more often. Moreover, while it is often argued that urbanization leads to more diverse diets and increased intakes of animal proteins and fats, our findings do not confirm this.

Wealth changes diets: the countryside may follow

We find that these trends are primarily driven by the higher incomes earned in the urban areas. But, as Africa develops, income in rural areas will increase as well. As such, it appears likely that these areas will follow the trend that is being set by cities when it comes to nutrition.

This allows public authorities to anticipate this change in diets. For example, by designing policies that enable the local food sector to adjust to the changing food demand, by informing people on the nutritional and health consequences of new eating patterns, and by preparing for the public health consequences that this will bring, not only in the cities, but as well in growing rural centers.

This policy brief is based on the following article

- Cockx, Lara, Liesbeth Colen and Joachim De Weerd. 2018. From Corn to Popcorn? Urbanization and food consumption in sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from rural-urban migrants in Tanzania. *World Development* 110:140-159.

The urbanization and nutrition data for Africa were taken from

- United Nations Children's Fund, World Health Organization, World Bank Group (2018). Levels and trends in child malnutrition: Key findings of the 2018 Edition of the Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018). *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*, Online Edition.
- World Health Organization (2018). *Global Health Observatory (GHO) Data*.

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