

# The Role of Traditional Food Systems in Rapid Urbanization

Scope, methods and high-level findings

## Policy Briefing Note 1

February 2024

### Summary

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This Briefing Note is the first in a series of four. It discusses the purpose of the project, its methodology and some of the high-level findings from the study, specifically the fieldwork conducted between May and July 2023 in two field sites in the City of Johannesburg Metropole (CoJ), South Africa. Based on these high-level findings, we propose the following policy recommendations: 1) Deeper interdisciplinary research on the contribution of traditional fruits and vegetables (TFVs) to food and nutrition security and how nutritional properties can be enhanced; 2) Greater collaboration amongst various actors and stakeholders to enhance public awareness of the various benefits of TFVs; and 3) Reworking parallel systems of production and trade.

## Introduction

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A review of the Census 2011 showed that internal migrants, and regional immigrants preferred to migrate to Gauteng, as opposed to other Provinces, and settle in the Johannesburg and Tshwane Metropolises. Census 2022 confirmed this settlement trend. In 2020, the South African Cities Network revealed that over 40% of households in the City of Johannesburg Metropole (CoJ) were food insecure because they could not access affordable and nutritious food.

Urban populations primarily depend on markets to access food. Hence, cities must prioritise access to affordable, acceptable and nutritious food through markets (formal and informal/regulated and unregulated), including supermarkets, small businesses, traders, hawkers and local urban farmers who sell directly to consumers. For a sense of 'home' and to maintain cultural practices, migrants often desire foods from their 'home' province or country but consume them irregularly due to availability and accessibility challenges. As such, they often resort to local alternatives.

Given migration trends and general food insecurity patterns, this study focused on two migrant groups in the CoJ: rural to urban migrants (internal migrants) and international regional migrants (immigrants). By identifying the drivers of food choice in these urban migrant populations around TFVs and the barriers to their consumption, the study aimed to generate knowledge to enhance urban planning and development policymaking to help tackle the problem of urban food insecurity and malnutrition.

### Three specific objectives of the research were to:

- (1) Explore if consumption of TFVs changes post-migration in the two different urban populations, capturing differences between recent and longer-term migrants.
- (2) Investigate the structural, economic, behavioural and cultural factors that shape the consumption of TFVs and changing diets post-migration.
- (3) Map the availability and supply chain of TFVs and fruits to consumers within the CoJ.

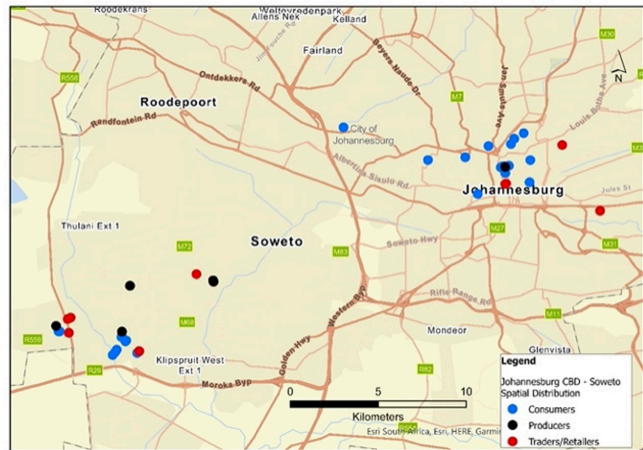
## Methodology

To identify potential field sites in the CoJ, we undertook a literature review and a spatial mapping exercise using poverty levels and internal and international migrant residence variables used in Census 2011. This data was complemented by a discussion with key stakeholders in November 2021 and further inputs from scholars working on traditional food consumption and urban agriculture in the CoJ. The final decision, based on the above and determined by available resources, was to select two field sites: (1) the Central Business District (CBD), including Yeoville, Braamfontein and Hillbrow, and (2) the Southern part of Soweto (Soweto South), including Protea Glen and Protea South. The research involved qualitative and quantitative interviews with participants representing household consumers, traders and farmers. While farmers were locally born CoJ residents or second-generation migrants, the households and traders were a mix of internal and international migrants. None were born in the CoJ.

For qualitative interviews, we recorded and transcribed 74 interviews. These were coded and then analysed using NVivo software. For the quantitative component, 72 interviews were captured using REDCap and then

analysed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).<sup>1</sup> Of the 72 respondents, 42 lived in the CBD area, and 30 lived in the Soweto South area. The sampling was stratified at each site to ensure a mix of households (upper limit of 30), producers (upper limit of 6) and traders (upper limit of 6) were interviewed (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Field site location and spatial sample distribution of consumers, producers and retailers**



## Key findings

### Characteristics of respondents

Across both sites, 73% of participants represented households, 17% traders, and 10% producers. They ranged from 19 to 89 years of age. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed were female (74%). While 10% reported no education, 63% had completed secondary or higher education studies. Over three-quarters of the sample (76%) had arrived in the CoJ since 2000, and 10% arrived between 1969 and 1994.

### Sending areas to the two field sites

Of the total sample, 60% were born in South Africa, and 40% were born in other African countries (immigrants), including Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Lesotho, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Zimbabweans comprised the single largest share at 17% of the sample, followed by Mozambiquans at 8%. In the

CBD, 48% of the 42 respondents were born in South Africa and came from the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, the North West, and Limpopo Provinces, with 50% of local migrants coming from Limpopo. Zimbabweans formed the greater share of cross-border migrants at 24%. In Soweto South, 67% of the 30 respondents came from the Eastern Cape, Free State, Mpumalanga and Limpopo, with 64% of local migrants coming from Limpopo. One respondent was born in the CoJ and had moved to this area for business purposes. Migrants from other African countries came equally from Lesotho (10%), Zimbabwe (10%) and Mozambique (13%). Unsurprisingly, with its cosmopolitan nature and work opportunities, the CBD appears to be a more favourable site for internal and cross-border migrants, particularly for cross-border migrants from Central and West Africa. Furthermore, internal migrants residing in Soweto South tended to have existing family ties, which was not as evident for those in the CBD.

1. Problems with the REDCap system meant that the quantitative data for 2 respondents was not captured.

## Consumption changes post-migration

Demand for traditional leafy vegetables (TLVs) and some traditional fruits was evident at both field sites. Internal and cross-border migrants reported eating TFVs in their sending villages and countries before moving to the CoJ. These TFVs were often produced in backyards, harvested from the wild or purchased at local markets where small-scale producers supplied the produce.

Fruit was generally eaten as a snack. Fruits eaten in sending areas and in the CoJ included those internationally traded, e.g. guavas, mangoes, bananas, oranges, grapefruit, naartjie, pineapple, litchees, and apples. The traditional fruits consumed depended on what was available in particular areas. Respondents reported eating the following traditional fruits in the CoJ: African melon, African watermelon, chocolate berry - *umtshwankela*, wild medlar, wild currant, loquat - *mahlatswa*, sour plum, prickly pear, Kei apple, marula and baobab. Most of these fruits grow in Southern Africa and were often brought informally to the CoJ from South Africa's northern and eastern provinces, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Fresh plantains or cooking bananas were imported through official channels and eaten as starch alongside leafy vegetables and meat. Other officially imported staples included yams, cocoyam or taro, and cassava. These were typically eaten with traditional vegetables when available. However, these vegetables were commonly eaten with maize meal porridge (*pap*), the above starches when affordable, maize and dried beans (*samp*), peanuts and dried beans (*mutakura*) and occasionally with rice and pasta.

In Africa, traditional vegetables are usually cooked as a vegetable stew, the bulk of which are green leafy vegetables, and accompany starch and meat (red meat, chicken, and fish) when available. The composition of this green leafy vegetable stew depends on what leaves and other vegetables are available. Stewed vegetables go by various names in Southern Africa, including *morogo*, *moroho*, *thepe*, *imfino* and *muriwo*. Traditionally, leafy vegetables were foraged wild, although some are cultivated in some countries as fewer species are available for foraging. In Southern Africa, a leafy green vegetable stew was typically a mix of *Amaranthus* (pigweed) leaves. It is often composed of cocoyam and cassava leaves in West Africa and Central Africa. In Mozambique, there is a preference for sweet potato leaves. Other reported leaves included mutshaina (*chomolia*), sorrel, blackjack, pumpkin, cowpea, Bambara nut, wild bush okra – jute mallow, nkaka (*mormodica balsamina*), bitter leaf (*Vernonia amygdalina*) and spider plant (*Cleome gynandra*).

Most respondents noted that at 'home', the stew should contain wild leafy vegetables or those growing in backyards. However, due to the unavailability of many

of these leaves, in some sending areas and the CoJ, they reported that they often made the dish from pumpkin leaves, kale, spinach (Swiss chard), Chinese cabbage and commercial okra leaves. The increased availability of mutshaina in the CoJ made this leafy vegetable a favourite for many. However, many people reported using spinach as a replacement. Others reported using beetroot and green bean leaves. The diverse flavour is given to the dish by mixing different leaves and adding tomatoes, crushed peanuts, salt, spices, red and green peppers, chillies, onions and spring onions. Central and West Africans might also add palm oil, while South Africans may add sunflower oil.

## Traditional Fruit and Vegetable Pathways into the CoJ

While many respondents purchased fresh leafy vegetables in the CoJ, they also brought dried and fresh leaves back from their sending areas. A few producers were cultivating some of the traditional vegetables that could be grown in the CoJ, e.g. bitter leaf and mutshaina. Traders were also selling some of these leafy vegetables at their stalls, especially those varieties available from Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, indicating a strong local demand for these leafy vegetables in various forms. While this demand was more evident in the CBD site, respondents from the Soweto South site reported being aware of the niche markets and traders, and availability of produce in the CBD. However, trips to the CBD were irregular, as transportation costs were high. The vegetables were expensive, and the markets may not have the desired leafy vegetables available that day. Migrants from different provinces and countries also had different preferences that were not always readily available. Migrants searched hard, but if not found, they swapped to locally available alternatives.

Vegetables such as spinach, mutshaina, kale and Chinese cabbage were commonly on sale at both sites. While these were produced by some local small-scale farmers in Soweto South, some traders there and in the CBD reported buying their stock from other parts of the CoJ, Gauteng, North-West, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Free State Provinces. Some of this trade was informal, and some involved purchasing from various farmers and produce markets. It is interesting to note that urban farmers we interviewed were generally selling directly to neighbouring consumers and had little, if any, interaction with informal traders and with formal produce markets and supermarkets, which tended to get their produce from large-scale producers in Gauteng and surrounding provinces. Urban producers appear to have little interaction with traders and none with the formal produce markets in the CoJ. Traders often operate informally; not only do they sell informally, but they also tend to import some produce informally.



Some immigrant traders mentioned informally importing fresh and dried leafy and other vegetables from Southern African countries, relying on social networks to assist with this process. Shops and formal markets selling these vegetables relied more directly on formal import channels, usually from Cameroon, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (see Figure 2).

Formal and informal traders have direct access to consumers and know the market demands for different leafy vegetables and other food. They could play a pivotal role in advising producers and larger produce markets about local food preferences. Informal traders often use informal import processes, and formal traders formally import food.

Many households reported getting fresh and dried leafy vegetables from family and social networks who visit them from sending areas or when they return to the sending areas – often referred to as 'home'. Newer rural migrants generally referred to rural provinces as home. Interestingly, a few women noted that Chinese cabbage, spinach, cabbage, and okra were being commonly produced in rural gardens, often a result of their introduction of these crops to the family when they returned to these areas. This illustrates how rural and urban diets are becoming interwoven in South Africa.

**Figure 2: Food pathways into the Johannesburg CBD and Soweto South**



## Knowledge about the value and consumption of Traditional Leafy Vegetables

Some respondents reported consuming leafy vegetables two to three times a week, mainly as morogo – stewed leafy vegetables. Residents in the CBD generally consumed this dish more often, probably because of easier access to various leafy vegetables and the larger numbers of international migrants, some of whom had only been in the CBD for a short time or regularly returned to sending countries. Many sample respondents reported preparing enough of the dish for at least two meals – evening and lunchtime. It was reiterated at both sites that these vegetables have many health and nutrient properties. It was reported that while vegetables are a healthy component of the diet, many dark green leafy vegetables were perceived to aid digestion and reduce the effects of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as high blood pressure and diabetes. The consumption of raw fruit was also perceived as an essential contribution to the body's health and was eaten as a snack or a dessert after the main meal.

Many, but not all, respondents grew up eating leafy vegetables, and most had some knowledge of preparing them. However, the bulk of the knowledge seemed to be held by older women, wives and grandmothers. A very small number of single male respondents in the CBD prepared their dishes. One respondent, a South African migrant who had married a Congolese man, indicated that he had taught her how to prepare the Congolese versions of leafy vegetables and other dishes. While some older women emphasised the need to follow traditional recipes carefully, younger people tended to be less specific. They would mix whatever they had on hand and add the preferred spices.

There was a perception that older children and the youth did not enjoy leafy vegetables. This was evidenced to some extent by a few single households indicating that they preferred salad leaves to cooked TLVs. A young man reported consuming no vegetables and only ate meat and starch. Some people further reported that on weekends or at least once a month, when affordable, the family would go out and have fast foods such as McDonalds, Nandos and Kentucky Fried Chicken as a treat. Many working respondents in the CBD reported eating fast food from local supermarkets and street food; green vegetables were seldom an accompaniment. However, some working respondents said that families often gather monthly or less frequently on a weekend to share a traditional meal that includes TLVs, meat and starch. Such a meal was different because it comprised several traditional dishes and included extended families and social networks. Such occasions allowed migrants to enjoy 'home' meals and share tales of home.

## Policy Recommendations

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Although consumers at these sites tended to blend their diets and consume available leafy vegetables, there is a demand for the availability and access to traditional vegetables. The demand for traditional fruits was less, and most seemed satisfied with what was locally available. The exception was the availability of traditional berry

fruits, which were unavailable at local markets and usually only consumed during visits to 'home'. Detailed recommendations are made in the other policy briefs. Here, it is worth noting a few high-level actions that can be achieved.

### 1. Deeper interdisciplinary research on the contribution of TFVs to food and nutrition security and how nutritional properties can be enhanced.

While people are aware of the importance of balanced and nutritious diets and the health advantages of leafy vegetables and fruit, their circumstances, including household income and location, contribute to the consumption of less healthy foods. Education, awareness and attempts to change eating patterns are the only ways to improve diets. Similarly, preparation and storage practices may undermine the nutrient value of traditional foodstuffs even if households shifted completely away from fast foods. Historically, large amounts of starch have been key components of the meals of poorer migrants, given their relatively low cost. Further interdisciplinary research is needed on consumption patterns, consumers' preparation, and traders' storage of fresh vegetables. Local urban farmers are promoting organic production. If some of the vegetables can be grown locally, this may make them more affordable as urban farmers generally sell their produce below supermarket prices. Furthermore, sharing knowledge about healthy and nutritious traditional dishes and increased awareness of the health benefits and flavours of such dishes without the currently unhealthy additives may contribute to healthier diets.

### 2. Greater collaboration amongst various actors and stakeholders to enhance public awareness of the various benefits of TFVs.

While initiating the study, we found that National and Provincial governments and civil society representatives were keenly interested in the production, consumption, trade and availability of TFVs in Gauteng. However, the CoJ local government was more interested in regulating fresh produce markets generally and ending informal trading by illegal immigrants. Various civil society organisations assist with production and promoting awareness of traditional foods. The Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (GDARD) has provided limited agricultural inputs to some households and community farming endeavours in these sites and funded learnerships at a few local organic producers. This support centred around producing mainstream leafy vegetable crops such as spinach, kale, and cabbage and local traditional leafy crops such as mutshaina. There is a need for these government departments and civil society organisations to collaborate on promoting and ensuring the accessibility and availability of TFVs, especially as some traditional fruits are indicated as invasive species in South Africa. This can be done by working hand in hand with local producers, traders and stakeholders. Local small farmers are open to experimenting with new crops if there is a demand, and traders are aware of local demands. Consultation is crucial.

### 3. Reworking parallel systems of production and trade.

Urban producers are excluded from mainstream supermarkets and produce markets. To some extent, informal traders selling TFVs also encounter challenges in accessing sufficient and regular supplies of TFVs from local produce markets. If certain TFVs could be produced in the urban environment of the CoJ, this would ensure a steady supply of desired TFVs. Exclusion from mainstream markets is not unique to the CoJ and has been a longstanding challenge for small-scale producers in urban and rural areas for decades. It may be necessary for urban producers and traders to pool their knowledge and resources to collaborate and set up their own networks to ensure that the desired crops are produced and sold. Further work in this area is required, including better networking and marketing. Farmers could establish small stalls on their premises to sell fresh and processed produce.

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