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“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

Linking cities and hinterlands: How food vendors shape food systems in urbanising West Africa

KIRA FASTNER¹, KOFI YEBOAH ASARE², JORDAN BLEKKING³

¹*University of Kassel, Organic Plant Production and Agroecosyst. Res. in the Tropics and Subtropics, Germany*

²*University of Cape Coast, School for Development Studies, Ghana*

³*Cornell University, Global Development, United States*

Abstract

As agricultural land disappears in West Africa’s rapidly urbanising regions, food production is increasingly displaced to rural hinterlands. Many former farmers are transitioning into off-farm jobs within the food economy and are now engaged in (informal) food distribution and vending activities. These employment shifts and their effects on regional food systems remain poorly understood. Food vendors are an integral part of the food system landscape by linking consumers and producers, urban regions and their rural hinterlands. Drawing on 500 surveys and GPS data from Tamale and Accra, Ghana, we analyse the diversity of vendors by creating a vendor typology and assess their influence on urban food access and rural-urban flows. Our vendor typology captures different business models, sales locations, product ranges, and sourcing patterns. The results suggest a high diversity of food vendors operating within the urban food system, ranging from formal to informal, stationary to mobile vendors, and vendors having previously farmed or not. Growing amounts of fresh produce – particularly fruits and vegetables – are sourced directly from smallholder farmers in rural hinterlands, often across expanding, at times transnational distances and without formal contracts. Supply chains are lengthening and the improved connection between cities and their rural hinterlands leads to a widespread change of agricultural land use decisions of many recently ‘market-linked farmers’. Although the growing number of actors in the food system and structures of high flexibility offer economic opportunities for many, escaping poverty remains challenging. Informal food vendors and the smallholder farmers they source from are often highly vulnerable to food price volatilities, natural hazards, domestic or international political turmoil which causes risks of food access shocks and income uncertainties within the rural-urban food system.

Keywords: Food flows, food vendors, rural-urban linkages, supply chains, urbanisation