

Survival of the Poorest: Urban Migration and Food Security in Namibia



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[Photo: Millet in rural Namibia piled high after harvest.]

Urban food security in Namibia may be more dependent on informal ties to rural relatives than other survival strategies such as urban agriculture.

[Bruce Frayne](#), a PhD student at Queens University in Canada, says the experiences of migrants to Windhoek, Namibia's capital and largest city, show that the urban poor rely on rural relatives to eat and survive. Frayne is a 1999 recipient of the [AGROPOLIS](#) Award, a graduate research prize in urban agriculture that is funded and managed by the International Development Research Centre, on behalf of the [Support Group on Urban Agriculture](#).

Rethinking poverty

According to Frayne, an urban regional planner from Namibia, his research suggests that poverty and food issues don't so much affect regions — the traditional view — as they do particular occupational groups, classes of households, and individuals. His findings could have implications for the development of food security policies in Namibia and other countries.

"Despite the overall trend toward a more urban society, the dynamic between the rural and urban areas remains fluid," he says. "The question really is, if urbanization [continues] as it seems to be, and the urban economy is not booming, how are these people going to [survive] in the long run?"

Demographic trends

Namibia borders the Atlantic Ocean in southwest Africa. The Namib Desert forms a third of its area, and the Kalahari Desert another third, making drought endemic — as much as 80 % of the country's food is imported. In the last decade, the proportion of rural Namibians has fallen from 70 to 65 %. It is estimated that the population of Windhoek will double between 1996 and 2004. While Namibia has a relatively high gross national income for a developing country (US\$1,960 in 1994), it is one of the world's most inequitable societies — the richest 5 % of the population accounts for 44 % of all private consumption.

With funding from the AGROPOLIS program, Frayne looked at how rural-urban linkages affect urban food security, an issue which had been largely neglected. Katatura, the site of his research, is the former black African township on Windhoek's outskirts. Katatura and Windhoek share a rocky, arid basin about 5,500 feet above sea level, ringed by mountains. Much of Katatura's housing is municipal, consisting of small two-room dwellings built by the country's former South African administration.

Signs of rural migration

"There are areas that consist of fairly middle-class structures, gardens, and the like. And beyond the rim of what one now calls the 'old township' are shanties," says Frayne. None of these existed when Namibia was declared independent in 1990 — they are a visible measure of rural migration into Windhoek.

"The opportunity to get into the wage sector, to make money, to buy a car, to have a house, and those sorts of things is what many people are after," he notes. But these goals are out of the question in economically depressed rural areas, although food is more readily available.

Jobs scarce

But in the rapidly expanding urban areas, jobs are now scarcer than applicants. While there are enough success stories to encourage migration, it is usually hope, not reality, that attracts migrants. Once they arrive in cities, the hopeful remain, but they survive on care packages from rural relatives. "The sheer number of people coming in, compared to the expansion of the urban economy in Windhoek, would suggest that there must be an awful lot of people who are not actually earning an income," says Frayne.

His survey of about 300 migrant households suggests that informally transferring food into urban areas is an important way of coping. More than half of the households surveyed received 'significant' amounts of Namibia's staple grain, millet, from rural relatives — often between 10 and 50 kilograms at a time. They also received other cultivated and wild foods, meat, poultry, and fish. More than half said the food from rural relatives was 'important' or 'very important' to their survival — another 10 % deemed it critical.

Migration of the poor

"There's a whole sector of society that doesn't have the cash to go and buy these goods from a supermarket. They're relying on their own households back in the rural areas to supply them. Poverty in the rural areas is really migrating to the urban areas and remaining there. As yet, there is no real transition from a poor rural state to a wealthier urban state," he stresses.

"Something that is very interesting and important is the extent to which urban households have relatives and/or friends back in the rural areas. Those sorts of social relations translate not only into the transport of food and other kinds of commodities, but also the movement of family members -- like children getting sent back to the rural areas for extended periods of schooling. It really is quite a symbiotic process."

Fragile symbiosis

While this symbiosis fuels Namibia's urbanization, it is relatively fragile, adds Frayne. It would take little economic change — an increase in fuel costs for example — to reduce the flow of food packages. "Given that it is part of this process of urbanization anyway, the main policy implication

is that authorities are going to have to start looking quite seriously at how people can — outside the formal system — promote their own food security," he says.

According to Frayne, Namibia should study the impact of migration on its rural environment, to find out whether further migration may affect food supplies to poorer city households. He also sees a need for research on systems to conserve water, to sustain small-scale urban household agriculture.

Urban agriculture

"I'm particularly interested in the urban side of this, and how urban authorities can proactively foster opportunities for urban agriculture that would help to feed their populations," he states. "Poverty is not good for anybody — not for the people who are in it or for everybody else, since you tend to have a rise in social instability and the kinds of problems associated with that."

Keane J. Shore is an Ottawa-based writer and editor. (Photo. B. Frayne)

If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca .

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