

Why urban agriculture isn't a panacea for Africa's food crisis

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Urban agriculture is widely [promoted](#) as the solution to the growing problem of [urban food insecurity](#) in [South Africa](#) and in [Africa more broadly](#). It is said to provide livelihoods and social cohesion, and have [environmental benefits](#). But it's also promoted as having additional food security benefits.



Food security efforts need to look beyond urban agriculture. Jane Battersby

It is the primary, and usually the only, food security [policy of local governments](#), and the focus of many NGOs and corporate social investment programmes.

There is, however, very little evidence to support this level of investment and focus.

It is thus important to critically assess whether the promotion of urban agriculture is warranted, particularly when it is at the expense of other potential solutions. We simply cannot afford to keep polishing the lamp and hoping the genie will appear.

Research shows something else

Proponents of urban agriculture offer figures suggesting that as many as [40% of African urban residents](#) are involved in some form of agriculture. Such figures require far greater interrogation. In the case of Cape Town in South Africa, research conducted in low-income areas of the city in 2008 found that [less than 5% of poor residents](#) were involved in any form of urban agriculture. In reality, those most active in [urban agriculture](#) were found to be wealthier people in low-income areas.

Context is a further determining factor. [Research](#) shows that in towns where the municipal boundary extended into areas with more rural characteristics, urban agriculture was higher.

In South Africa this finding is supported by the [2011 census](#), which identified more than 30% of the population practising urban agriculture in medium-sized towns like Mafikeng, Polokwane and Newcastle. In Mogale City and Johannesburg, larger settlements with large urban settlements adjacent, the practice was well below 10%. And in Cape Town it was [below 5%](#). Context, climate, soil fertility and spatial legacies all matter.

There is little evidence to suggest urban agriculture is contributing to food and nutrition security, either [locally](#) or [internationally](#). The incomes from sales of produce are generally low, so the indirect food security benefits are limited.

Assumptions without evidence

The assumption in much advocacy work and policy is that urban agriculture benefits the most food-insecure households. But numerous case studies show [this is not the case](#).

Two themes are implicit in motivations for urban agriculture. The first is [welfare driven](#). The second is a narrative that calls for self-help interventions so that the poor initiate their own food security through urban agriculture. This assumes free time for the under-employed poor, who pursue multiple strategies to [survive](#).

Linked to this is the assumption that the food insecure can get access to land, water, seeds and everything else they need. This misses the [reality of poverty](#). State and NGO programmes do facilitate access to such resources, but the most vulnerable lack the knowledge or social networks to access these.

Urban agriculture is often promoted as [a means of empowerment](#). But expecting the urban poor, who have the least access to resources, to grow their own and lift themselves out of poverty and food insecurity fails to recognise the [barriers constraining urban agriculture](#). That isn't empowerment; it's the cruelty of false promises.

So where does the dogged pursuit of urban agriculture as the solution come from?

1. Local governments have no direct food security mandate, as food insecurity is still considered by most states to be [primarily a rural problem](#). This means local governments wishing to address food insecurity adapt rural programmes to meet urban needs.
2. Food insecurity is seen as a [household poverty problem](#) and not a systemic problem. The obvious household response is food production.
3. The state is largely unwilling to address the systemic drivers of food insecurity, which would entail regulating [food companies](#) and challenging the [dominant development agenda](#).

Looked at in this light it is possible to view the increased promotion of urban agriculture as a politically reactionary response. It claims to be aimed at fixing the worst effects of structural poverty and food insecurity. But it doesn't actually address the [root causes](#).

Changes that need to be made

For as long as urban agriculture remains local government's main entry point for addressing food insecurity, it is essential that programming be improved.

First, more effort needs to be made in monitoring and evaluation of government-run initiatives. Though inputs are monitored

well, outputs and impact monitoring are extremely weak. This means many programmes are failing and lessons are not being learnt.

Second, many NGOs working in urban agriculture have sustainable, viable projects. Local government should work more directly with these to increase the viability of state-initiated projects.

And if urban agriculture is to be a main focus area for food security programming, then suitable land should be identified and protected.

But urban food security efforts need to look beyond urban agriculture. For example, it is essential that local governments understand the food system in which urban agriculture operates to understand why producers struggle to find markets for their goods. This would allow them to develop a range of interventions based on their existing mandates, including integrating formal and informal food retailing spaces, and supporting fresh produce markets to increase their role in local, pro-poor food value chains.

Finally, local governments should develop food security strategies to guide their interventions. Through these measures, urban agriculture can remain integral to efforts to alleviate food insecurity and would be more likely to have the [desired impact](#).

It is clear that urban agriculture can have significant benefits for some participating [households](#). But we are concerned about the absence of wider evidence supporting its potential to address food insecurity beyond those households. The assertion that urban agriculture can provoke systemic change is untested. Through their dogged promotion of urban agriculture, [the state](#) and the private sector can claim they are working towards food insecurity and have a good photo op with key personnel in wellington boots. At the same time they can absolve themselves from responsibility for the causes of food insecurity.

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