

## Leveraging Food Remittances for Enhanced Food Security in Urban Africa

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### Executive Summary

This policy brief highlights the critical yet underexplored role of food remittances in enhancing food security across Africa. While global attention has predominantly focused on cash remittances and their economic impacts, food remittances – defined as the transfer of foodstuffs by migrants to their home regions – play a vital role in ensuring the availability, accessibility, and stability of food supplies for both rural and urban households. These remittances help bridge the food security gap between urban and rural areas, with food produced in rural regions supporting the nutritional needs of family members in cities. The reciprocal flow of resources, where urban households may send cash or other goods back to rural areas, strengthens food security across the continent. Given the increasing urbanization and food insecurity challenges in Africa, it is essential for policymakers to recognize and integrate food remittances into national food security strategies. Ultimately, food remittances should be recognized as a vital component of sustainable development efforts, particularly in the context of Africa’s ongoing urbanization and the challenges posed by climate change and economic instability.



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### Introduction

Despite their importance, food remittances have largely been overlooked in both academic research and policymaking. Most studies and policy discussions have concentrated on the economic impacts of cash remittances, such as their role in poverty alleviation, investment in human capital, and contributions to household income. However, food remittances, which are often more prevalent among certain migrant populations, particularly those from agrarian backgrounds, have not been given the attention they deserve. This oversight is partly due to the challenges in quantifying food remittances, as they often occur through informal channels and are not easily tracked or measured. Additionally, the focus on cash remittances has been driven by the assumption that monetary transfers are more flexible and can be used to meet a variety of household needs, including food purchases. However, this assumption overlooks the cultural, social, and economic significance of food remittances, which often carry symbolic value and strengthen social ties between migrants and their families.

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In Africa, food remittances are a common practice, particularly among rural households with family members who have migrated to urban areas. These remittances help bridge the food security gap between urban and rural areas by ensuring that food produced in rural regions can be consumed by family members living in cities. This practice not only supports the nutritional needs of urban households but also reinforces the social and economic ties between urban migrants and their rural origins. For many rural households, sending food to urban relatives is a way to maintain family connections and fulfil social obligations. In some cases, urban households reciprocate by sending cash or other goods back to their rural counterparts, creating a reciprocal flow of resources that strengthens both rural and urban food security. This reciprocity is crucial for maintaining the livelihoods of both rural and urban families, as it allows for the sharing of resources in ways that mitigate the vulnerabilities of each.

## Key Findings

### Food Remittances and Food Security

- Food remittances are crucial for ensuring food security in both rural and urban households. They offer a direct means of supporting family members in urban areas, often mitigating the effects of food insecurity in these settings.
- In Africa, where urban poverty and food insecurity are rising concerns, food remittances act as a buffer, providing much-needed nutrition and stability. Unlike cash remittances, which may be spent on various needs, food remittances ensure that the recipients have direct access to food, which is essential for survival.
- Food remittances help diversify the diets of recipients. Urban households that receive food remittances from rural areas often gain access to fresh, locally produced foodstuffs that may not be readily available or affordable in urban markets. This can include staple foods such as maize, millet, and sorghum, as well as vegetables, fruits, and animal products like meat and dairy.
- In many African countries, where urban diets are increasingly dominated by processed foods that are high in sugars, fats, and salts, the influx of traditional foods from rural areas can help counterbalance this trend and promote healthier eating habits.
- Moreover, food remittances play a vital role during periods of economic or environmental shocks. For example, during times of drought, political instability, or economic downturns, when food prices in urban areas may spike or when access to food markets is disrupted, food remittances can provide a lifeline for urban households. This flow of food from rural to urban areas can help prevent food insecurity from escalating into a crisis.
- Additionally, the ability to rely on food remittances during such periods reduces the financial burden on urban households, allowing them to allocate their limited resources to other critical needs, such as healthcare, education, and housing.
- The effectiveness of food remittances in enhancing food security depends on various factors, including the frequency and quantity of remittances, the types of food remitted, and the ability of households to store and utilize the food effectively.

### Geographical Variability of Food Remittances

- There is significant variability in the types, amounts, and frequencies of food remittances depending on geographic factors. For example, the types of food remitted from rural to urban areas may differ from those sent between urban centres. In many cases, rural-urban food remittances consist of staples such as cereals and tubers, which are commonly grown in rural areas and are less perishable, making them suitable for long-distance transportation. In contrast, urban-urban food remittances may include a higher proportion of processed foods and perishables, reflecting the greater availability of these items in urban markets.
- The variability in food remittance patterns is also influenced by the proximity of rural and urban areas. In regions where rural areas are close to urban centres, food remittances are likely to be more frequent and may include a wider variety of fresh produce. In contrast, in regions where rural areas are remote and transportation infrastructure is limited, food remittances may be less frequent and consist primarily of non-perishable items. Additionally, the frequency of food remittances can vary with the agricultural cycle, with more remittances occurring during and after the harvest season when food is more abundant.
- Another important factor influencing the geographical variability of food remittances is the level of urbanization. In highly urbanized areas, where a significant proportion of the population has limited access to land for agriculture, the reliance on food remittances from

rural areas may be higher. Conversely, in less urbanized regions where urban residents may still have access to agricultural land, the need for food remittances may be lower. However, even in less urbanized areas, food remittances can play a critical role in supporting the food security of households that are unable to produce sufficient food for their own consumption.

- Understanding the geographical variability of food remittances is crucial for designing effective policies that address the specific needs of different regions. For example, in areas where rural-urban food remittances are prevalent, policies could focus on improving transportation infrastructure and reducing the costs associated with sending food over long distances. In urban areas where food remittances are less common, interventions could aim to support urban agriculture and local food production to reduce the reliance on food remittances and enhance food security.

### Reciprocal Remitting

- Reciprocal remitting, where food flows from rural areas to urban centres and cash flows in the opposite direction, highlights the interdependence between these regions. This dynamic relationship underscores the importance of maintaining strong rural-urban linkages to support food security. The reciprocal flow of resources allows both rural and urban households to diversify their sources of food and income, reducing their vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks.
- In many African cities, food remittances from rural areas play a crucial role in the food security of low-income households. Many of these households have strong ties to rural areas, where family members continue to engage in subsistence agriculture. These rural households send food to their urban relatives, who, in turn, send cash remittances to support the agricultural activities of their rural kin. This reciprocal relationship ensures that both rural and urban households have access to the resources they need to survive and thrive.
- Reciprocal remitting illustrates the importance of social networks in facilitating food remittances. Many urban households rely on extended family networks to receive food from rural areas. These are often based on long-standing social obligations and mutual support systems, reinforced by regular exchanges of food and other resources. For many urban residents, maintaining these social ties is essential not only for their own food security but also for the well-being of their rural relatives.
- The practice of reciprocal remitting is not without challenges. The transportation of food from rural to urban areas can be costly and time-consuming, particularly in regions with poor infrastructure. Additionally, the availability of surplus food in rural areas is often seasonal, meaning that food remittances may not be a reliable source of food year-round. Furthermore, the pressures of urbanization and climate change may disrupt traditional patterns of reciprocal remitting, making it more difficult for rural and urban households to support each other.
- To address these challenges, policies should focus on strengthening the infrastructure and systems that support reciprocal remitting. This could include improving rural transportation networks, providing storage facilities to reduce food spoilage, and supporting agricultural practices that increase food production in rural areas. Additionally, recognizing the value of social networks in facilitating food remittances could lead to the development of community-based initiatives that reinforce these networks and enhance the resilience of both rural and urban households.

### Food Remittances to Low-Income Urban Households in Southern Africa

	% of all households receiving food remittances	% of recipient households receiving remittances from rural areas	% of recipient households receiving remittances from urban areas only	% of recipient households receiving remittances from rural and urban areas
Windhoek, Namibia	47	72	12	16
Lusaka, Zambia	44	39	44	17
Harare, Zimbabwe	42	37	43	20
Maseru, Lesotho	37	49	44	7
Blantyre, Malawi	36	38	51	11
Manzini, Swaziland	35	53	40	7
Msunduzi, South Africa	24	15	82	3
Maputo, Mozambique	23	23	62	15
Gaborone, Botswana	22	70	16	14

Source: AFSUN

## Policy Recommendations

### Incorporating Food Remittances into National Food Security Strategies

- National and city food strategies and plans should acknowledge food remittances as a critical aspect of food security. By doing so, they can ensure that these remittances are supported through infrastructure improvements, such as better transportation networks, which can facilitate the efficient transfer of food from rural to urban areas. Policies should also aim to reduce the costs associated with sending food remittances, making it easier for rural households to support their urban relatives.
- One approach to incorporating food remittances into national food security strategies is to develop targeted support programmes for households that rely on food remittances. These programmes could provide subsidies or financial assistance to cover the costs of transportation, packaging, and storage of food remittances. Additionally, governments could invest in improving rural infrastructure, such as roads and communication networks, to reduce the time and cost involved in sending food remittances.
- Another key policy area is the development of legal and regulatory frameworks that support the safe and efficient transfer of food remittances. This could include establishing standards for the transportation and storage of perishable food items to prevent spoilage and ensure food safety. Additionally, governments could work with private sector partners to develop innovative solutions, such as mobile technology platforms, that facilitate the coordination and tracking of food remittances.
- Moreover, integrating food remittances into broader food security and development programmes can help align efforts to improve food security across different sectors. For example, food security programmes that focus on nutrition and health could incorporate food remittance strategies to ensure that households receive the diverse and nutritious foods they need. Similarly, agricultural development programmes could support the production of crops that are commonly sent as food remittances, thereby increasing the availability of these foods.

### Strengthening Rural-Urban Linkages

- Policies should aim to reinforce the connections between rural food producers and urban consumers. This

can include initiatives that support smallholder farmers in rural areas, ensuring they can produce enough surplus to send to urban family members. Supporting smallholder farmers could involve providing access to improved seeds, fertilizers, and farming technologies that increase agricultural productivity and resilience to climate change.

- Additionally, policies could promote the establishment of local markets and cooperatives that facilitate the exchange of food between rural and urban areas. These markets could serve as collection points for food remittances, where rural producers can sell or exchange their surplus produce for transport to urban centres. Cooperatives could also help reduce the costs of food remittances by pooling resources and negotiating better prices for transportation and other services.
- Supporting the development of rural-urban food networks can also help diversify the sources of food available to urban consumers. By linking rural producers directly with urban markets, these networks can reduce the dependence on food imports and improve the availability of fresh, locally-produced food in urban areas. This, in turn, can enhance the resilience of urban food systems to external shocks, such as disruptions in global supply chains.
- To strengthen rural-urban linkages, governments could also invest in infrastructure that facilitates the flow of food and other resources between rural and urban areas. This could include improving rural roads, bridges, and transportation systems to reduce the time and cost of sending food remittances. Additionally, governments could support the development of communication networks that allow rural and urban households to coordinate the timing and delivery of food remittances more effectively.

### Supporting Research on Food Remittances

- There is a clear need for more research into the dynamics of food remittances. This research should focus on understanding the volume and frequency of these transfers, as well as their impact on food security, to inform more effective policies. Additionally, research should explore the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence food remittance practices, including the role of gender, migration patterns, and household dynamics.
- One area of research could involve conducting large-scale surveys to quantify the volume and value of food

remittances across different regions of Africa. These surveys could collect data on the types of food remitted, the frequency and seasonality of remittances, and the costs associated with sending and receiving food. The data collected could then be used to develop models that predict the impact of food remittances on household food security and identify the factors that influence food remittance patterns.

- Another important research area is the exploration of the nutritional impact of food remittances. Researchers could investigate how food remittances contribute to dietary diversity, food consumption patterns, and nutritional outcomes in recipient households. Understanding the nutritional benefits of food remittances could inform the development of nutrition-sensitive policies that promote the consumption of healthy and diverse diets.
- Research could also examine the role of food remittances in mitigating the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on food security. For example, studies could explore how food remittances help households cope with the impacts of droughts, floods, and other climate-related events. Additionally, research could assess the potential for food remittances to support sustainable agricultural practices and reduce the environmental footprint of food production and distribution.
- Finally, research should consider the implications of food remittances for gender equity and social inclusion. Investigating the role of women in food remittance practices, both as senders and recipients, could provide valuable insights into how gender dynamics influence food security outcomes. Additionally, research could explore how food remittances contribute to the empowerment of marginalised groups, such as smallholder farmers, migrant workers, and low-income urban households.

### Leveraging Urban-Urban Food Remittances

- As urbanisation continues, urban-urban food remittances are becoming increasingly significant. Policymakers should consider this trend and develop strategies that facilitate food flows between urban centres, potentially helping to mitigate food insecurity in rapidly growing cities. Urban-urban food remittances, which often involve the transfer of processed foods, fresh produce, and other commodities between urban households, reflect the growing interconnectedness of urban food systems.
- One strategy to leverage urban-urban food remittances is to promote the development of local and regional

food hubs. These hubs could serve as centralised points for the collection, processing, and distribution of food remittances between urban areas. By connecting producers, processors, and consumers within a regional food system, these hubs could improve the efficiency and sustainability of food remittance flows. Additionally, food hubs could support the growth of urban agriculture by providing access to markets and distribution channels for urban farmers.

- Policies could also encourage the use of technology to facilitate urban-urban food remittances. For example, digital platforms and mobile applications could be developed to connect urban consumers with food suppliers in other cities. These platforms could enable consumers to order and pay for food remotely, while suppliers could use logistics services to deliver food directly to the recipients. By leveraging technology, urban-urban food remittances could become more accessible and affordable for a wider range of households.
- Furthermore, governments could invest in the development of infrastructure that supports the flow of food between urban centres. This could include improving transportation networks, such as highways, railways, and ports, that connect major cities. By reducing the time and cost of transporting food between urban areas, these investments could help lower food prices and improve food security in rapidly growing cities.
- In addition to these strategies, policymakers should consider the environmental impact of urban-urban food remittances. Ensuring that food remittance flows are sustainable and environmentally friendly is essential for the long-term viability of urban food systems. This could involve promoting the use of low-carbon transportation methods, such as electric vehicles or rail transport, for the distribution of food remittances. Additionally, policies could encourage the reduction of food waste in urban-urban food remittance chains by supporting initiatives that extend the shelf life of perishable foods and promote the reuse and recycling of packaging materials.

### Conclusion

The policy brief seeks to shed light on the importance of food remittances as a vital component of food security strategies in Africa. By integrating food remittances into national food security frameworks, policymakers can better support the nutritional needs of both rural and urban populations, particularly in the face of increasing urbanisation and the

growing challenges of food insecurity in cities. The brief also calls for further research into the dynamics of food remittances, including their volume, frequency, and impact on household food security, to develop more effective policies that leverage this crucial but often overlooked form of remittance. Furthermore, understanding the gender dynamics of food remittances—such as the role of women in both sending and receiving food—can provide insights into how food security interventions can be tailored to address the specific needs and contributions of different household members.

To effectively leverage food remittances, policymakers must address the challenges associated with their transfer, such as high transportation costs, infrastructure limitations, and the risk of food spoilage. Additionally, policies should focus on strengthening the social networks and community-based initiatives that facilitate food remittances, ensuring that these networks remain resilient in the face of changing economic and environmental conditions. By taking a holistic approach that integrates food remittances into broader food security and development strategies, Africa can make significant strides towards achieving food security for all its citizens.

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