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Food Retail, Markets and Informality in Africa



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SUMMARY

The purpose of this brief is to highlight the socio-economic, infrastructural and governance challenges faced by ‘territorial’ food marketers and smallholder farmers in public markets and along busy transit routes in Africa. Examples are mainly from Benin, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. The aim is to pinpoint possible areas of investment that will enhance access to remunerative markets for food that is produced and processed in alignment with agroecological principles.

Key messages

- Smallholder farmers are known to produce most of the world’s food and provide most of the investments in agriculture (Kay 2016; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) 2017), particularly in Africa. However, the markets in which they commonly operate are consciously and/or unconsciously neglected, sidelined and discriminated against in public policy-making (Civil Society Mechanism 2015).
- In most African countries, farmers, retailers and other marketers operate largely in ‘territorial markets’, with formidable socio-economic, infrastructural, governance, safety, sanitation and other challenges, even though about 70–90% of agricultural products go through these markets (FAO 2015; Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration (ETC Group) 2017, 2022).
- The healthy and diverse products produced by local farmers, mostly through agroecological processes, contribute significantly to food and nutrition security and food sovereignty in rural, peri-urban and urban areas. Furthermore, the methods of production boost biodiversity, enhance climate resilience, and maintain and restore the health of ecosystems (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems 2024).
- Increasing urbanisation in African countries is worsening the challenges already faced and poses further challenges for the valuable services provided by territorial markets to about 50–80% of the population.
- Philanthropic investments can support research and advocacy. They also deepen the understanding of how territorial markets function so that evidence can be provided to policy-makers to tackle the varied challenges in territorial markets in the different countries.



INTRODUCTION

What is at stake?

Although there continues to be controversy about the proportion of food produced by smallholder farmers worldwide, it is agreed that the number is considerable, by at least one-third (Kay 2016; FAO 2017; ETC Group 2017, 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, about 80% of food producers are smallholders, producing approximately 70% of domestic food requirements (Oyewole 2022, Statista 2024). Most African smallholder farmer practices are resilient and sustainable but are characterised by low productivity (Ma et al. 2024), hence the call for a transition to agroecological production systems that are rooted in smallholder production systems but have great potential for high productivity (Altieri 2004).

There is considerable evidence that agroecological production systems have the potential to improve planetary health, human nutrition, sustainability, resilience, food justice and the empowerment of local people,

especially women (Maass Wolfenson 2013). There is also substantial evidence of the important role of marketing and access to markets in driving increases in productivity and sustainability (Oduro & Osei-Akoto 2007). In Africa, most of the food marketing and sale of other agricultural produce is done by small-scale business traders and farmers in 'territorial markets',¹ which are found in various forms in rural, peri-urban and urban areas. The main issue is that despite the importance of these markets, they have been ignored, sidelined, castigated and discriminated against by agents of African governments and the organised private sector, including international competitors.

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Characteristics of the African retail market system

The African food retail market system typically consists of small, independent retailers and wholesalers in market spaces in cities, towns, villages and roadsides as well as along intercity roads and streets (Goossens 2012). The commodities marketed generally include locally based raw, semi-processed and processed foodstuffs as well as ready-to-eat foods and some imported products. Retailers often offer both fresh and processed products in different quantities and at different prices (Owuor et al 2017; Battersby & Haysom 2018; Wanyama et al. 2019). In all these markets, the structures and places used for the sale of the products range from relatively big stalls and buildings to tables and even to the ground. The marketing systems involve men, women, the youth and children. However, women and girls tend to dominate the sector (Hays-Mitchell 1995; Tacoli 2016; Clark 2018; FAO 2022; Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) n.d.).

Rural communities usually sell their products to either local buyers or traders who are connected to marketplaces in peri-urban and urban centers (Kambewa et al. 2008;

Adekambi et al. 2015, 2018). They also sell to informal food vendors in cities who tend to be economically, socially and spatially integrated within the urban food system (Giroux et al. 2021). According to Resnick (2017), the prevailing (territorial) marketing system has long been the linchpin of food security for the urban poor. Informal street traders make nutritious food available to the urban poor at prices that are significantly lower than nearby formal supermarkets.

The local food systems and foodstuffs have numerous benefits and advantages. They represent a holistic food production, distribution and consumption approach that emphasises community-based and sustainable practices (Feeley et al. 2011). The local food markets and informal food vendors offer valuable opportunities for fostering community resilience, preserving cultural heritage and advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Ericksen et al. 2010). The local markets contribute unique offerings that are reflective of their cultural heritage and local resources (Benhin 2006). Thus, they are crucial in preserving cultural heritage and culinary traditions, which are intricately linked to high levels of nutrition and to food sovereignty (Fuseini 2023). Promoting food security without considering food sovereignty, especially in rural areas, is highly deficient (Charlton 2016; Wittman 2023).



Key stakeholders in food retail, markets and informality in Africa

Almost everyone who eats food is a stakeholder because about 70–80% of the food produced worldwide goes through territorial market systems. That is the degree of importance of the local food marketing system. The following individuals may, however, be considered as the key stakeholders:

- Local farmers;
- Input and credit providers;
- Different types of marketers including aggregators, transporters, processors, food storage personnel, consumers, government officials, policy-makers and agents;
- Personnel and agents from non-governmental organisations; and
- Other development practitioners and agents.

All these individuals are, more or less, directly affected by actions in the market. Their decisions, actions and inactions have profound effects on how the markets function. It must be noted that actors in territorial markets do not function in linear value chain fashions. The complexity of relationships, actions and inactions in territorial markets is what gives them their humanity and beauty.

Food retail, markets and informality in relation to the principles of agroecology

Agroecology has been defined severally and its 13 principles and 10 elements are very well-articulated (FAO 2018; High Level Panel of Experts 2019). The marketing system that

will be aligned to these principles and elements is what will enhance the effective transition to agroecology. Products that are produced agroecologically must enjoy remunerated markets to encourage increased production, but the prices of the products must be such as to attract consumers. Relatively high prices will discourage the purchase of agroecological products. Although important, price is only one aspect in purchase decision-making. Probably more important for consumers who prioritise their health and are well-informed of the implications of climate change are the diversity, nutritional and health value, and environmental footprints of the product (that is, environmental and social agroecological principles).

Food retail and marketing will be most beneficial if it can go by all the 13 principles but that can be a challenge and likely unrealistic. The agroecological principles that are highly linked to food retail, markets and informality include:

- Three of the five environmental principles: Recycling, efficiency and diversity;
- All the social principles: Co-creation of knowledge, social values and diets, fairness and connectivity; and
- Three of the four economic principles: Participation, resilience, and circular and solidarity economy.

This clearly indicates the importance of being mindful of agroecological principles in designing interventions in territorial markets.

Most small farmer production, storage, processing and marketing etc. in Africa largely follow agroecological principles, though not as well as one would have liked. The main constraints are the infrastructure, governance and socio-economic conditions at various territorial markets. Philanthropic support towards reducing the effects of these constraints will benefit the marketing systems and, by implication, the whole sustainable development agenda.



MOTIVATION

Africa's urban population is the fastest growing in the world (Resnick 2017). It is projected that most people in Africa will reside in urban and peri-urban areas by 2030 (Henderson & Casey 2015). Urbanisation comes with several attendant challenges including food insecurity, hunger, malnutrition, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and difficulties in making food available at the places where and times when they are needed (World Bank 2018; Haysom 2023).

Whether residing in rural, peri urban or urban areas, Africans generally cherish local foodstuffs – usually produced using agroecological processes – for a variety of socio-cultural, economic, financial, nutritional, habitual and other reasons (Hetcheli 2009; Allagbe et al. 2018; Alinsato & Houedokou 2019; Ndébi & Dama Dié 2020; Magbondé et al. 2023). People in urban areas are also becoming more conscious about their health and shunning highly processed foods as they believe that these foods are associated with non-communicable diseases such as high blood pressure, cancer and diabetes. Activities in territorial markets are critical to meeting the needs of a large proportion of consumers who prefer local indigenous farm products, which are considered best for nutrition and for the promotion of local economies. Even in many urban areas, there is preference for retail markets of locally produced foodstuffs rather than supermarket purchases.

Street vending, which is dominated by women and girls in most parts of Africa (WIEGO n.d.) is another critical issue that needs attention. According to WIEGO-supported research, street vendors in Accra, Ghana experience financial instability and hardship, despite working between 56 and 66 hours in a week (Anyidoho 2013). And in Nakuru, Kenya, 50% of the street vendors interviewed had at least some secondary education and 13% had post-secondary education. Of that same sample, 78% of street vendors said there were too few customers for their goods and that they obtained low profits (Lubaale & Nyang'oro 2013). In the case of Durban, South Africa, it was reported that the turnover for street vendors was low (about US\$325 per month) and male vendors had a turnover that was more than double that of their female counterparts (Mkhize et al. 2013).

These statistics clearly indicate the economic predicament of street vendors, especially women vendors. Other studies have shown the evictions and harassments that street vendors face in various cities and towns in Africa and elsewhere (WIEGO n.d.). According to Resnick (2017), many African countries still retain colonial-era legislation on street vending that penalises sellers and buyers. Other colonial laws relate to having formal business registration, which limits informal traders to the outskirts of trade markets and excludes them from accessing formal markets altogether. Government interventions have focused on control, regulation and often violent eradication of the urban informal food economy (Resnick 2017). Vendors are generally susceptible to harassment, extortion and violence from both informal actors and law enforcement agencies. Inadequate legal protection and enforcement mechanisms contribute to a culture of impunity.

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It is worth researching all these issues and suggesting ways in which government and philanthropic investments can be harnessed towards finding solutions to enhance the transitions to agroecological and sustainable food systems.

The benefits of well-functioning territorial markets are enormous, especially with respect to advancing and promoting the agroecological transition.

- Territorial markets are directly linked to local, national and/or regional food systems. They serve as sale outlets for local producers. They thus have great potential for increasing farm productivity and

incomes, and reducing poverty for smallholder (agroecological) farmers.

- Territorial markets also have strong backward linkages to boosting biodiversity, enhancing climate-resilience and maintaining and restoring the health of ecosystems. This is because large portions of products in such markets are agroecological, and sustainable production processes are therefore enhanced.
- As explained above, the marketing system involves the sale of very diversified products and a range of people: men, women, the youth and children. Food diversification implies greater potential for better nutrition and better health for people. The variety of people involved implies inclusivity and greater equity.
- Territorial markets tend to be multi-functional and relational. Their activities extend beyond buying and selling. Different actors, smallholders, traders, transporters, processors and others establish relationships and perform additional social, cultural, medicinal, spiritual and community development functions in their territories and communities. The markets have the potential to support and even engineer development agendas in the territorial areas.
- Territorial markets also have great potential to improve local economies since the people within a territorial space do the buying and selling. Examples include the Pout market in rural Senegal, which has improved the Thies region (Diop 2016), and the Mbare Musika market in Harare, Zimbabwe.



CASE STUDIES

Benin, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa

The case studies looked at the general state of food retail, market and informality in four countries: Benin, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. The main aim was to identify the challenges faced by the market actors. Perspectives of marketing activities were sought from different types of marketers through visits to urban, peri-urban and rural markets, busy transit routes (routes linking towns and cities) and streets where food vendors operate in cities and towns. Information was obtained on the degree of success of their businesses, the key challenges they face, what practical steps can be taken to address the challenges and

what other steps can be taken to improve their businesses without losing the unique beneficial services they offer to consumers.

Government and non-governmental personnel were asked about their views on food retail, markets and informality. They were also asked what they think governments and others can do to improve informal marketing, including street vending, without losing the unique benefits.

The table below presents a summary of findings.

Summary of field findings

Country	Summary of major findings	Main challenges
Benin	<p>Very diverse food products are sold in urban and rural areas and along transit routes. They include vegetables, cereals, roots and tubers, gari, tapioca, ready-to-consume processed food products such as chips, roasted corn, processed corn (<i>Akpan</i>) and others.</p> <p>The diversity in products reflects the vendors' ability to meet the varied needs of local consumers. About 63% of vendors considered their activities to be moderately successful even though 'profit margins are very small mainly due to continuous and unpredictable price fluctuations'.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of capital to function at scales that are profitable; • Competition from imported food products that are substitutes; • High transportation costs partly due to poor roads; • Low and fluctuating prices of the products; and • Low patronage leading to high food loss and waste.



Country	Summary of major findings	Main challenges
Ghana	<p>All types of local foodstuff are sold. Cereals (maize, rice, millet and sorghum), roots and tubers (yam, cassava, cocoyam and sweet potato), grain legumes (beans and groundnuts), plantains, palm oil and coconut oil dominate the markets depending on the part of the country. Other foodstuffs include vegetables (onions, tomato, pepper etc.) and fruits (banana, pawpaw, pineapple, mango, citrus, pear etc.), which are commonly sold along the highways.</p> <p>Most marketers in the cities and big towns and along the highways said their businesses are either 'profitable' or 'somehow profitable'. Many are satisfied with what they are doing, especially in the absence of alternative jobs, even though they face a lot of challenges. Those in the rural areas, however, said their businesses are 'from hand to mouth', as in they are not profitable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dilapidated roads between cities, towns and villages, and even in the cities and towns, making marketing very tedious and expensive; • Deplorable market infrastructures, if any, for locally produced foodstuffs in all parts of the country, leading to high food loss and waste; • Cereal marketers in rural areas complain of exploitation by 'middlemen and women'. The farm-gate prices are less than half the prices at nearby towns that have wholesale facilities; • The intermediaries give loans to rural marketers and farmers at exorbitant interest rates; • A complete lack of loan facilities for informal marketers from formal sources; and • A civil servant lamented that 'young boys and girls risk their lives from dawn to dusk in street vending to earn less than a living wage, and without a future'.
Kenya	<p>The informal food sector provides food close to where workers live and work. Credit and barter are possible, small quantities can be purchased, and many items are sold for cheaper than at formal outlets.</p> <p>The main local food commodities marketed by those in fixed locations include vegetables and fruits such as arrow root, sweet potato, cassava, <i>Sambusa</i> and fried cassava, roasted maize, <i>Mutura</i> (African sausage) and kebabs. Meanwhile, street vendors hawk fruits, ice cream, sugarcane, coffee and <i>Mandazi</i> and other local cooked and fried foods.</p> <p>Most of the marketers said their businesses are 'somehow successful' even though the profits are 'very low'. However, some vegetable and fruit sellers said their businesses are 'successful'. Most of them are happy because they are self-employed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of suitable market stalls coupled with harsh weather (rainy and dusty); • Undependable government promises such as providing cheap funding; • Tedious work – wake up early (4:00am) and close late (10:00pm) daily; • Limited capital and low profits; • Frequent changes in the taxation of commodities; • Political instability – frequent protests destabilise businesses; and • Ready-to-eat food business (e.g. <i>Mutura</i>) is very risky – a lack of customers can collapse the business at any time.
South Africa	<p>The main food commodities marketed informally in the urban, peri-urban and rural areas are vegetables, fruits and grains.</p> <p>Informal market associations are common and useful, and many informal marketers are members. Most of these associations are not recognised, however.</p> <p>Only those who have regular customers can manage to make ends meet but 'the competition and lack of proper facilities make it tough.'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor infrastructure such as storage facilities, transportation and roads; • Inconsistent supply from producers and/or rural marketers; • High competition from the formal sector; and • Harassment by law enforcement personnel.

Source: Field survey, 2024



ORGANIC MANURE FROM AGRO-WASTES

All four countries studied have local (territorial) markets but most of them lack physical, social, educational, sanitary and marketing infrastructure. Many marketers do not have sheds, storage and other facilities. These infrastructural facilities are basic elements for supporting meaningful marketing activities.

In Benin, informal agricultural trade is marginalised, with no formal recognition or benefits accorded by the government. Its operations are limited by access to finance, infrastructure and support services. Informal traders also face challenges with respect to health and environmental risks to themselves and consumers (Alinsato & Houedokou 2019; Agalati & Degla 2020; Assouma et al. 2021). Furthermore, traceability and quality control of the food products are almost impossible.

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BRIQUETTES PRODUCED FROM AGRO-WASTES

In Ghana, it is a common, almost daily, occurrence for housewives located in cities to go to city (territorial) markets at 4:00am or earlier to wait for local foodstuffs to arrive from the rural and peri-urban areas. The aim is to get fresh, safe and nutritious foodstuffs from the villages and at reasonable prices. The Agbogbloshie and Tema Station commercial districts in Accra are good examples of such markets.

In the Yilo Krobo municipal district of the Eastern Region of Ghana, agricultural waste consisting of discarded food from markets and spoilt mangoes from numerous mango farms is recycled into organic manure and briquettes (see pictures above). The system, established by the International Water Management Institute in collaboration with the Municipal Assembly and a private company, is a largely successful pilot and should be replicated in other locations.

South Africa has relatively well-functioning territorial markets that play a significant role in fostering community-based trade and creating vibrant local economies. Examples of such markets (shown below) include the Amalinda Fresh Produce Market and Gonubie Farmers Hall in East London. Both of these markets provide platforms for small-scale producers, artisans and entrepreneurs to engage directly

with consumers. They typically thrive on the sale of fresh fruits, vegetables, baked goods, handmade crafts and local delicacies, creating a sense of place and belonging within the community.

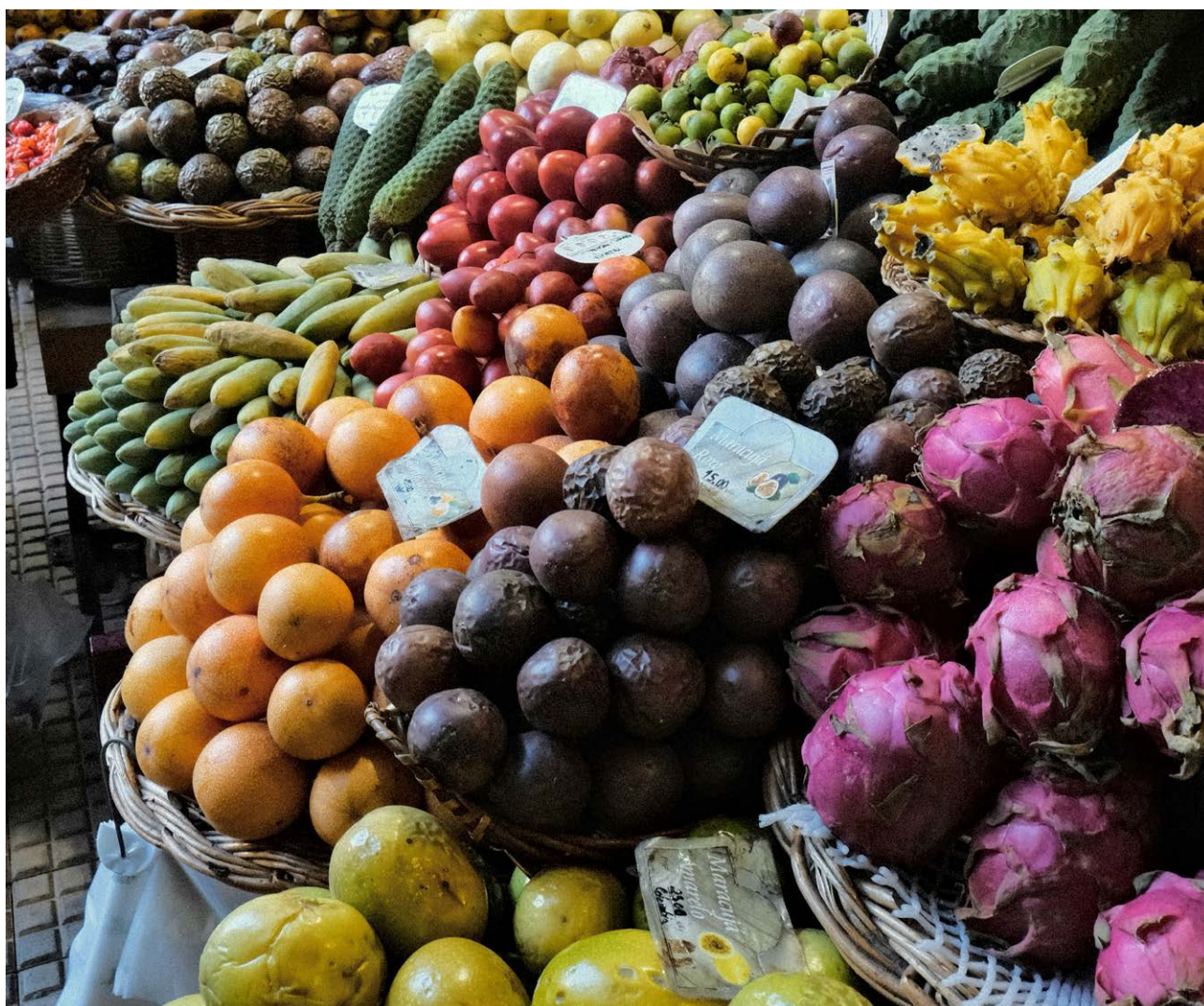
Territorial markets like those in East London are vital for socio-economic development as they enable informal traders and emerging businesses to operate without the constraints of formal retail settings. They also serve as cultural hubs, where the diversity of the community is reflected through the products and services offered, from traditional African crafts to modern fusion foods. In addition, these markets support sustainable practices since many vendors prioritise locally sourced and eco-friendly goods, thereby reducing the environmental footprint associated with transportation and packaging.

Moreover, the markets contribute significantly to food security by connecting consumers with affordable and fresh produce. They act as distribution centres for small-

scale farmers whose livelihoods depend on direct sales to customers. Events such as food fairs and holiday-themed markets further enhance the appeal of territorial markets, attracting tourists and promoting local tourism. In doing so, they bolster the city's economy and elevate its cultural profile.

Events such as food fairs and holiday-themed markets further enhance the appeal of territorial markets, attracting tourists and promoting local tourism

Despite their benefits, territorial markets in East London face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, regulatory hurdles and competition from large retail chains. To sustain and enhance their impact, municipal authorities and



stakeholders must invest in market infrastructure, provide capacity-building programmes for traders and promote collaboration between the formal and informal sectors. Such efforts can ensure that these markets remain vibrant spaces of economic inclusion and cultural expression. By celebrating and supporting territorial markets, East London reinforces its identity as a city that is rooted in community-driven growth and resilience.

Other well-known territorial markets in Africa that are advancing sustainable food systems by supporting local producers, minimising food loss and waste and creating opportunities for agroecological products to reach consumers are the Pout market in the Thies region of Senegal and the Mbare Musika market in Harare, Zimbabwe.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROMOTE TRANSITIONS

- 1. Basic infrastructure needs to be purposefully designed for locally produced foodstuff.** In particular, well-constructed market stalls with adequate storage in cities, towns and communities. Civil society organisations and traders' organisations require support to advocate for national, sub-national and local governments to prioritise such infrastructure. The risk of fires in territorial markets with poor infrastructure is very high, as was the case with the Mbare Musika market in Harare in 2024.²
- 2. Philanthropic investments into research and advocacy to deepen the understanding of how territorial markets function is highly recommended.** Policy-makers will only pay attention to the concept of territorial markets and agroecological transition if evidence can be provided to convince them.
- 3. Legislation should be enacted to lessen the burden of street vending and to protect street vendors from harassment and exploitation.** The risks that young children are exposed to in their bid to serve the people and to earn a little income are too great. According to WIEGO (n.d.), '[I]n Africa, street vendor evictions continue in a drive to "beautify" and combat disease, but also to punish'. We believe the main aim has been to punish.
- 4. The concept of farmers' markets should be analysed across various countries and the strategies adapted for implementation.** Farmers' markets should become special markets within the territorial market system. Linking producers to consumers through these markets is good for both actors and can take place at all levels. Philanthropic support can be used to promote (institutionalise) such markets.
- 5. Local food marketing (and processing) has great potential for decent job creation if adequate entrepreneurial knowledge is applied to it.** Incorporating the teaching of local food marketing into the curricula of faculties and schools of agriculture will be a way forward. It must be noted, however, that the concept of value chain development as currently being promoted is at variance with the concept of territorial markets.
- 6. Special training programmes on the functioning and development of territorial markets should be organised for graduates of agricultural studies and others in all parts of Africa to promote the idea of territorial markets.** It would be a sure step to effectively promote the agroecological transition through a change in mindset.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Territorial markets are markets situated in and identified with specific areas in which the vast majority of smallholders are engaged. These markets are embedded into local, national and regional food systems (Kay 2016).
- 2 On 10 October 2024 a massive fire swept through Mbarara Musika, a major suburban territorial market in fruits and vegetables, in Harare, Zimbabwe. This was mainly because of poor infrastructure.



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This network of researchers and food systems development experts collaborates to inform philanthropies, governments and development finance organisations on funding strategies to promote transitions to sustainable, equitable and resilient food systems across Africa.

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