



# How African cities lead: Urban policy innovation and agriculture in Kampala and Nairobi

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## ABSTRACT

City governments in sub-Saharan Africa have historically been beholden to national governments. Lack of national urban policies and tensions between national and city governments are common. Yet, for decades, research has identified small-scale innovations at the urban scale. Rarely, however, are policy innovations in African cities so influential as to lead national governments to scale up city based actions. This is particularly true in sectors that have been the dominant purview of central governments. This paper examines how citizens, civil society organizations, city governments and national bureaucrats in two cities of East Africa – Kampala and Nairobi – have interacted to produce policy innovation in agriculture. Agriculture has always been a sector of high national importance in Africa, but increasingly cities are becoming focal points for agricultural policy change. The two cities compared in the paper are unusual in having a collection of interests who have been advocating for improved support and recognition of urban food production. Indeed, these cities are rare for having continually promoted the formalization of urban agriculture in local and national policy. While advocacy for urban agriculture is common globally, what is not clear is under what conditions local advocacy produces policy uptake and change. What are the conditions when city-based advocacy deepens the institutionalization of policy support locally and nationally? Drawing from theory and research on policy change and African urban politics and governance, and qualitative data collection in each country, this paper argues that while external, international assistance has helped initiate policy dialogue, domestic civil society organizations and their engagement with local and national bureaucrats are key to policy support at the local and national scales.

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## 1. Introduction

For decades, national governments in East Africa have ignored the ‘urban challenge’ (Gore & Muwanga, 2014). This is despite East Africa being one of the fastest-urbanizing regions in the world (UN-Habitat, 2008) and cities there facing significant challenges relating to housing, service provision, employment and income-generation opportunities, as well as overall quality of life and health (UN-Habitat, 2014, p. 11). In recent years, national governments in East Africa have ‘awoken’ to the urban challenge, developing national urban policies. However, there remains a lack of clarity about the division of powers and functions between cities and national governments and a lack of resources to support those functions. Inter-governmental tensions and conflict have been common as a result, with calls for national governments to ‘do more’ to support cities: “African countries need an explicit national urban strategy to focus and direct the efforts of a number of actors that have a role to play in the urban development agenda. . . Central to such national policy

frameworks is clarity on the appropriate division of powers and functions across the various levels of government. . .” (Smit & Pieterse, 2014, p. 154). Achieving clarity on the role of different actors is profoundly difficult. While national government engagement is critical, overemphasis on national or international support can overshadow the actions and agency of city-based actors.

This paper builds on historic work that problematized state-city relations in Africa (Lipton, 1977; Stren & White, 1989), and continuing work that probes the political dynamic between cities, national governments, and international actors (Branch & Mampilly, 2015; Goodfellow & Titeca, 2012; Paller, 2014; Resnick, 2011). It follows recent arguments for research to understand how decision-making processes work in local urban politics (Myers, 2011, p. 116) and “how central governments act (or do not act) in the cities and towns of Africa” (Parnell & Simon, 2014, p. 238).

One way of understanding these political dynamics is to examine an issue or sector where there is administrative overlap – where there is *not* a clear division of powers and functions – and where urban civil society or city governments are playing a prominent role in promoting a policy or program agenda. This latter condition

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provides a unique opportunity in the study of city-national government relations; while elections, national policy or program implementation and financial transfers are subjects that offer an opportunity to examine how local and national power and authority are articulated locally, examining a policy or program area where advocacy is rooted at the local scale means that researchers can evaluate how and under what conditions local preferences are articulated horizontally and vertically, and how they become institutionalized and sustained over time. Policy advocacy rooted at the local scale or seemingly arising from the urban scale offers an opportunity to examine how new policy agendas with a clear local dimension materialize and capture city and national government attention (see [Carmin, Anguelovski & Roberts, 2012](#)).

In this paper, I use the issue of urban agriculture (UA) – the production, consumption and sale of agricultural products generated within a city's boundaries ([Mougeot, 2000](#) in [Prain et al., 2010](#), p.7) – to explore city-national-international relations and how local agency is exercised in African cities. Urban agriculture is often cited as a significant component of the urban food system in Africa and globally. Some sources suggest that 800 million people are engaged in urban agriculture worldwide, producing 15–20 percent of the world's food; some estimates suggest that by 2020, “35–40 million Africans living in cities will depend on urban agriculture to meet their food requirements” ([Karanja & Njenga, 2011](#), p. 111). Further, research has shown that urban agriculture and livestock keeping have been important livelihood strategies for women, the urban poor and vulnerable households in African cities, even when the policy environment has been unfavourable or hostile due to perceived nuisance and public health risks ([Hooton et al., 2007](#), p. 12). Other research, while acknowledging that vulnerable households do engage in urban agriculture for food and income and that the proportion of households practicing urban agriculture varies significantly across southern African cities, cautions that “it is far from being the panacea that advocates suggest” ([Crush, Frayne & Pendelton, 2012](#), p. 286), in terms of being a response to low or poor food supply.

Despite the varied but real household and livelihood benefits of urban food production in African cities (see [Maxwell, 1999](#); [Lee-Smith, 2010](#); [Prain, Karanja, & Lee-Smith, 2010](#); [Lee-Smith, 2013](#); [Crush, Hovorka & Tevera, 2011](#)), there remain surprisingly few comparative studies of policy development in African cities ([Robinson, 2011](#)) and urban agricultural policy, specifically. Given that “The making and realization of policy is a game of power and conflicting interests” ([Lee-Smith, 2010](#), p. 497) research that “examines the power relations between the various actors involved is needed” ([Lee-Smith & Prain, 2010](#), p. 301). But as literature on urban agriculture in Africa is replete with recommendations for greater policy support, it remains unclear what form this support takes when it is realized and why it arises at all. Given the continued global advocacy for cities to foster sustainable urban food systems, understanding the dynamic between international, national and local actors in the evolution of support for urban agriculture and urban food policy provides a window into the political dynamics at work in fostering policy change. Hence, this paper is centrally concerned with how and why support for UA is being formalized and institutionalized in African cities:<sup>1</sup> What explains the

varying degrees of institutionalization of urban agriculture in East Africa? What is the constellation of actors and conditions that lead to greater support for urban agriculture in cities? Is support driven by city leaders, city bureaucrats, citizens and farmers, domestic or international civil society organizations, or international experts? To what extent is greater support a result of domestic versus international actors?

Counter to the assumption that African cities are beholden to national government preferences, and lack agency to exert and influence policy that is in the national interest, this paper presents evidence that domestic urban actors connected to the promotion of urban agriculture in primate cities are playing dominant roles in driving institutional change at the city level and even nationally. While international actors have played critical roles in fostering attention to UA and sometimes facilitating dialogue and policy development, this research shows that the institutionalization of, and greater support for UA, has been dependent on domestic coalitions of urban and national actors rather than international ones.

In this paper, ‘institutionalized’ is defined as both the formal recognition and articulation of urban agriculture (UA) in local and national policy and legislation, and the routine application or support for this articulation (see [Lee-Smith, 2010](#)). In this regard, institutions or the institutionalization of urban agriculture is specifically about the formal establishment of rules and practices to support urban agriculture repeated over time ([North, 1990](#); [Ostrom, 1990](#)). This paper does not examine the establishment of new bureaucratic entities or organizations as a form of ‘institutionalization’. While the creation of new agricultural bureaucracies or staff positions is certainly an example of the formal institutionalization of urban agriculture, this paper is interested in the establishment of rules and actions to support UA rather than the bureaucracies themselves. This is because the paper is interested in tracing the historical conditions leading to more support and the articulation of that support through policies, rules and actions, rather than the absence or presence of offices or staff who may potentially support UA.

The findings in this paper are novel for identifying the role of farmers, domestic civil society actors and government bureaucrats in promoting policy change. While external, particularly international, actors and city governments were important for the promotion of UA at the city level, and learning is taking place between countries and because of international experts, it is the clear, consistent, and continual advocacy of domestic civil society organizations, farmers, and domestic public servants that explains the depth and momentum of urban agricultural institutionalization. Indeed, the results of this research highlight the role of the ‘street-level bureaucrat’ generally ([Lipsky, 1980](#)) and in African service delivery specifically ([Kamuzora & Gilson, 2007](#); [Crook & Aye, 2006](#); [McDonald, 1997](#)). ‘Street-level’ and ‘front-line’ bureaucrats are generally interchangeable terms to connote the individual on the ‘frontline’ of the interaction between citizens and government: they are the interface between the bureaucracy and the citizenry and have a high level of discretion in the application or implementation of government policy ([Kamuzora & Gilson, 2007](#), p. 96). How the street-level bureaucrat functions in African service delivery has proven particularly important in understanding how government policy is translated into practice. This is true in urban food production as well. The street-level agricultural bureaucrat is critical in building relations with domestic civil society and farmers, and for applying restrictive policy and regulation and/or advocating for permissive policy and law that responds to local needs. [Lee-Smith and Prain \(2010\)](#) hypothesized that sustained civil society engagement and domestic advocacy with government officials and street-level bureaucrats, which is independent of international funding sources, may be critical for the long-term institutionalization and support for UA locally and nationally. The evidence

<sup>1</sup> It is important to acknowledge that greater institutionalization is not universally endorsed or proven to be beneficial. This was a concern raised almost twenty years ago by [Ellis and Sumberg \(1998\)](#). They acknowledged the benefits of urban agriculture, but suggested that evidence was not sufficient to argue that an investment in policy support for urban agriculture was needed, particularly if this led to large-scale donor funding or to “measures that are unenforceable, unsustainable or susceptible to capture by stronger social groups at the expense of the weak” ([1998](#), p. 220). They further argued that “The only firm policy conclusion that emerges from the arguments and evidence reviewed here is that government and municipal authorities should in many instances abandon the charade of attempting to prohibit food production activities in towns” ([1998](#), p. 221).

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