



## **LIFE AMIDST A PANDEMIC:**

Urban livelihoods, food security and nutrition  
in Sub-Saharan Africa

**December 2021**



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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>JICA</b>	Japan International Cooperation Agency
<b>MGA</b>	Malagasy Ariary
<b>mVAM</b>	mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping
<b>SADC</b>	Southern African Development Community
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SSA</b>	Sub-Saharan Africa
<b>UIIDP</b>	Urban Institutional and Infrastructure Development Program
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UN-Habitat</b>	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollar
<b>WASH</b>	Water, sanitation and hygiene
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This report was produced through joint efforts of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) RAM Division in Regional Bureaus in Nairobi, Dakar and Johannesburg and the UN-Habitat's Regional Office for Africa and the Data and Analytics Section.

Both agencies would like to express gratitude and appreciation to the authors of the report: from WFP Krishna Pahari, Kennedy Nanga, Netsai Dhorro and Para Hunzai; and from UN-Habitat, Donatien Beguy and Robert Ndugwa. Special thanks go to senior advisers: Andrew Odero, Krishna Pahari, Ollo Sib, Siddharth Krishnaswamy from WFP and Oumar Sylla and Ishaku Maitumbi (UN-Habitat) for their expertise, vital guidance and many useful contributions and perspectives.

This report would not have been possible without the participation and contributions of colleagues from both Agencies. We are grateful for the country and regional offices' colleagues from both organizations for their valuable insights and expertise. Contributions by WFP's Regional Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit and UN-Habitat programme were also invaluable.

Appreciation is extended to all those involved in the editing, graphic design, proofreading of the report, particularly Sahiba Turgesen from WFP. Special thanks to Pauline Muchigi for the graphic design and Zaccheus Ndirima for producing the maps.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The future of the world's population will undeniably continue to be urban albeit with a variety of challenges such as inequalities, climate change, unemployment, including numerous shocks such as floods and drought, conflict, and macroeconomic challenges. In 2050, 68% of the world's population is expected to reside in urban areas, up from 56% in 2020. Drawing on a wide range of data sources, this report presents a review of urban vulnerabilities and food security perspectives amidst a global pandemic. Working from both urban vulnerabilities and food security perspectives, the report articulates the unique challenges faced by the urban poor populations residing in slums and informal settlements in Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, the report explores how the COVID-19 pandemic and associated containment measures deepened the economic vulnerability of the urban poor.

The analyses reveal that in most cases, the urban poor thrive on informal economy, live in overcrowded conditions, and have limited access to basic social services including water, sanitation and health and formal social safety nets. More so, urban livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa, unlike rural setups, are less diversified, irregular, and unstable and are dominantly informal and more reliant on markets and cash economy. These aspects were disrupted by the pandemic and the subsequent restrictions put in place to control the spread of the pandemic, in turn deepening the vulnerability of the urban poor. The drastic economic slow-down in several Sub-Saharan African countries in 2020 resulted in a disproportionate level of loss of income and employment among the urban poor. A combination of disrupted food systems, food price volatilities, inflation and high food prices meant reduced household capacity to afford food from markets. Consequently, it is estimated that in 2020, 68.1 million urban population were at risk of acute food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa -42 percent of the total 162 million food insecure populations including in rural areas. Of the 68.1 million, 22 million were in Central Africa, 16 million in West Africa, 15.7 million in East Africa and 14.4 million in Southern Africa. Ultimately, considerable gains in addressing poverty and inequalities for the last 10 years have all been wiped out under the impact of the pandemic with the socioeconomic situation of the urban poor coming off worse.

The analysis also reveals distinct regional differences to understand the diversity of urban solutions and desired fixes, while also providing the implications of these scenarios for inclusive and sustainable urban development. For example, the analysis demonstrates that in some regions, a new kind of infrastructure and supportive services are required to support inclusive urban development in rapidly urbanizing regions of Africa amidst stagnant or slower improvements in the per capita incomes, and a worsening housing crisis as manifested through the proliferation of slums and informal settlements.

### About this report

In this context, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have been working closely on mitigating urban vulnerability. A joint report on the impact of COVID-19 on urban livelihoods and food security in East Africa was released in August 2020, and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in October 2020 to formalize the collaboration between the two organizations. This report is a result of the continued collaboration aimed at **highlighting the challenges of maintaining livelihoods and food security in the vulnerable urban populations in SSA.**

Given the fact that urban areas are the epicentres of the pandemic and over 95 percent of the confirmed COVID-19 cases are in urban areas,<sup>1</sup> the report **provides the analysis of acute food and nutrition insecurity as well as urban specific vulnerabilities for 49 SSA countries.**

The report is structured as follows: Chapter 1 provides an introduction and background on SSA. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the COVID-19 progression in the region and its broader economic impact. Chapter 3 provides a snapshot of urbanization trends in the region and associated challenges. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods, markets and prices, and food security and nutrition. This also includes a section on gender and protection concerns in times of COVID-19. Chapter 5 provides a description of the various programmatic actions in response to COVID-19. Chapter 6 provides a regional focus and a description of the unique situation in each of the four sub-regions within SSA. Chapter 7 provides a brief overview of ongoing activities for urban monitoring for an evidence-based response, and finally, Chapter 8 provides key conclusions and recommendations.

<sup>1</sup> UN-Habitat. (2020) UN-Habitat's COVID-19 Response Plan available at <https://unhabitat.org/un-habitat-covid-19-response-plan>. (Accessed: 29 November 2021).



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is rapidly transforming the world. By the time of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adoption in 2015, about 54 percent (4 billion) of the world's population lived in urban areas. By the end of the 20-year period covering the New Urban Agenda in 2036, it is projected that an estimated 62 percent (5.4 billion) of the world's population will be residing in urban areas<sup>2</sup>, slightly higher than the 50.9 percent projected for Africa. The current trends of urbanization are largely driven by rural to urban migration, in search for economic opportunities and better access to services.

At 41 percent<sup>3</sup>, the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region is one of the world's fastest urbanizing regions. The high rate of urbanization in SSA is associated with more challenges than opportunities. For instance, the region has the highest incidence of slums (or informal settlements) in the world. Currently, about 200 million residents in SSA live in slums<sup>4</sup>. This number represents about 62 percent of the region's urban population, and SSA ranks the highest in the world for urban poverty. Additionally, in some SSA countries, about three in four urban residents live in informal, low-income settlements. Not only is the incidence of slums high in these countries, but also is the severity of the level of deprivation in some cities with more than one third of the slum population living with two or more deprivations (lack of clean water, sanitation, overcrowding, durable housing and tenure security)<sup>5</sup>. While slum upgrading and poverty reduction efforts have contributed to reducing the proportion of households living in slums by 14 percentage points since 1990, due to rapid urbanization, almost 110 million people have joined the ranks of slum dwellers over the same period. Globally, half of the extremely poor live in SSA<sup>6</sup>.

SSA has been struggling to deal with numerous shocks including floods and drought, conflict and macroeconomic challenges. The impact of COVID-19 has been devastating and has significantly impacted economies, with detrimental effects on livelihoods, food security and nutrition of populations throughout the world. While the pandemic affected all sections of the populations, the urban population (which makes up more than 60 percent of SSA) has been particularly hit hard since over 90 percent of the COVID-19 cases have been recorded in cities<sup>7</sup>. The socioeconomic situation of the urban poor has worsened under the impact of the pandemic. Millions of the urban poor were facing food insecurity, adding to the already existing severe food security situation in the region<sup>8</sup>. This has highlighted urban areas as emerging spots of food insecurity and malnutrition.

### Sub-Saharan Africa and subregions

Recognizing that there are different classifications of countries by various organizations on what constitutes SSA, for the purpose of this report, all the countries in the Eastern, Central, Southern and Western sub-regions of Africa, as classified by the African Union, were part of SSA. These are as follows:

**Eastern Africa:** Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda.

**Southern:** Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Eswatini (former Swaziland), Zambia and Zimbabwe

**Western:** Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo

**Central:** Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea,

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