

Policy Brief

Harnessing the Power of Local Actions to Advance the Social Determinants of Health: A Case of Mbale City

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Introduction and Background

Food system governance is a collection of political, organisational and administrative processes, through which food system stakeholders express their interests, claim their rights and fulfil their obligations, mediate their differences and take decisions, which influence and shape production, distribution, processing and trade in food. As a result, it inevitably affects food availability, accessibility, utilization and

supply stability (Smit, 2018; Van Bers et al, 2016). It provides a framework for managing the food system, mapping out decision makers, their authority and accountabilities.

In Mbale City, the food system faces persistent challenges despite its fertile surroundings and vibrant markets (EQUINET, 2024). Poor infrastructure, weak governance, and inadequate



food safety regulation undermine food access and quality (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2023). Overcrowded stalls, low hygiene standards, and unmanaged organic waste create health and environmental risks, while nutrition insecurity continues to affect vulnerable households (UBOS, 2022). Heavy reliance on informal markets without proper oversight further exposes consumers to unsafe practices. Rapid urbanization intensifies these pressures, highlighting the need for coordinated local action to strengthen governance, improve hygiene, reduce waste, and build a more resilient, equitable food system (WHO, 2022). At the same time, the city's health services remain unevenly distributed, with gaps in maternal and child health infrastructure, sanitation, and skilled personnel, contributing to rising burdens of foodborne illness, malnutrition, and diet-related diseases (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2023).

Mbale City also presents strong opportunities to improve nutrition and wellbeing by leveraging its fertile agricultural base, vibrant markets, and community driven initiatives. Strengthening governance and food

safety, improving hygiene in markets, and supporting smallholder farmers can expand access to diverse, affordable diets while enhancing livelihoods. When combined with sustainable practices such as waste reduction and inclusive participation, these local actions provide strategic pathways to advance equity, resilience, and healthier outcomes across the population.

The Good Food for Cities (GF4C) pilot in Mbale responds to these challenges through participatory, community-led governance that aims to increase availability and affordability of safe, nutritious foods, protect informal livelihoods, and strengthen upstream systems such as market hygiene, cold chains, and vendor practices that determine food safety and dietary quality (Rikolto, 2023). This brief analyses GF4C's model, outcomes, and policy implications, and offers a prioritized agenda for municipal decision-makers seeking to translate local gains into sustained improvements in nutrition, food safety, and health equity (EQUINET, 2024).

Context

Globally, urban market structures, vendor practices, municipal services and consumer information shape diets and nutrition outcomes (IFPRI, 2021). Rapid urbanization is driving consumption toward processed, energy-dense foods and concentrating diet-related health burdens in cities (FAO, 2023). Market

hygiene, cold-chain integrity and steady supplies of diverse, nutrient-dense perishables are upstream determinants of urban food safety and dietary quality. Strengthening these systems will reduce microbiological contamination and lower lifetime NCD risk (WHO, 2024).

Projections indicate that roughly 68–80% of global food consumption will occur in cities by 2050, underscoring the need for city-level governance to secure equitable access to safe, affordable, nutritious foods (HLPE-CFS, 2024).

At the continental scale, rapid urbanization is accelerating a nutrition transition, rising overweight, obesity, and diet-related NCDs alongside persistent undernutrition concentrated among the urban poor (HLPE-CFS, 2024).

In Uganda, widespread reliance on informal markets—characterized by sanitation deficits, fragmented cold chains, and irregular supplies of micronutrient-rich perishables—elevates food-safety and nutrition risks and has contributed to rising overweight, obesity, and NCD prevalence (Kansiime et al., 2025; UDHS, 2022).

Mbale, a rapidly growing secondary city in Eastern Uganda, exemplifies these dynamics. Its food system is dominated by informal markets and street vendors, where sanitation challenges, weak cold-chain infrastructure, and seasonal fluctuations in supply compromise both food safety and dietary diversity (AfriFOODlinks, 2024). Urban poverty furthers constrain access to nutrient-rich foods, leaving marginalized households vulnerable to both undernutrition and diet-related NCDs.

The Good Food for Cities (GF4C) programme in Mbale is a community-driven initiative that addresses systemic failures in urban food value chains and strengthens local food governance, rooted in food sovereignty, social justice, and ecological sustainability to improve equitable access to healthy diets (Rikolto, 2022).

The GF4C action in Mbale has increased access to safe, nutritious diets and reinforced the social determinants of health by linking inclusive governance, local production, data-driven planning, social protection, and community empowerment (EQUINET, 2024). These integrated measures make healthy food more available and affordable for marginalized groups while building local capacity to manage food risks and shocks.

The programme's emphasis on sustainable production, market inclusion, and multisectoral governance offers a city-scale route to improve food safety, increase supplies of nutritious fresh foods, and realize the right to health through everyday living conditions (EQUINET, 2024).

Thus, participatory urban governance and community engagement in Mbale will address foodborne illness, raise dietary diversity and ensure city investments and regulations reflect the priorities of all food systems actors (World Bank, 2019).

How Local Actions in the Mbale City Food System are Advancing the Social Determinants of Health

Local actions in urban food systems are a strategic entry point for addressing the social determinants of health. Given the complex, multi-sectoral nature of urban food systems, these actions provide opportunities to develop coordinated, tailored, and place-based interventions that improve population health and reduce social inequalities (Darly & H.M., 2017).

The **Good Food for Cities (GF4C) programme** in Mbale City demonstrates how local food system interventions can advance the social determinants of health by improving food access, hygiene, livelihoods, and community participation. These measures strengthen equity, nutrition, and resilience in ways that directly address core determinants such as income, education, environment, and social inclusion.

Table: Local Actions in Mbale's Food System and Their Impact on Health Determinants

Focus Area	Local Action	Impact on Health Determinants
Food Access & Nutrition	Reorganizing Mbale Central Market stalls with better hygiene and infrastructure.	Improves access to safe, nutritious food, reducing risks of foodborne illness and malnutrition.
Economic Empowerment	Supporting smallholder farmers and vendors through training, fair pricing, and stronger supply chains.	Enhances livelihoods and income security, which are critical social determinants of health.
Education & Awareness	Nutrition education campaigns and school feeding initiatives.	Builds knowledge and skills, empowering families to make healthier food choices.
Community Participation & Governance	Inclusive good food parliament for participatory planning in Mbale's food system.	Strengthens social cohesion, civic engagement, and equity in decision-making.
Environmental Sustainability	Promoting sustainable farming practices, reducing food waste, and improving urban farming.	Creates healthier living environments, reduces pollution, and supports climate resilience.

Key lessons

- Participatory Governance: MSPs such as the Good Food Council and Parliament are effective mechanisms for inclusive decision-making, strategic learning, and adaptive change.
- Community mobilization: Mobilizing and strengthening local initiatives builds ownership and sustains change through community capacity and leadership.
- Formalize MSPs: Institutional recognition and budget lines are essential to sustain MSP functions and scale impacts.
- Focus monitoring on a few actionable indicators: Simple, routine market checks and vendor certification metrics enable adaptive governance without heavy reporting burdens.
- Leverage co-production: Community evidence and lived experience accelerate practical, locally appropriate solutions and strengthen compliance.

Recommendations

- *Cities should leverage the technical capacity of multi-stakeholder platforms such as the Good Food Parliament to strengthen national food governance, with a focus on policy formulation to regulate unsafe food practices, improve food safety, and sustain public awareness campaigns that promote safe, nutritious diets.*

Conclusion

Harnessing community-driven initiatives such as the Good Food Parliament is a practical and strategic pathway for municipalities to advance the social determinants of health by improving food safety, dietary quality, and protection of informal livelihoods.

To translate pilot gains into durable impact, these platforms must be formally recognized and resourced, regulatory reforms must be paired with vendor support, and a compact M&E system must be established to guide adaptive scaling.

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