

Urban households ruralizing their livelihoods: The changing nature of urban-rural linkages in an East African town

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Abstract

As far as rural-urban linkages in sub-Saharan Africa are concerned, the focus has so far predominantly been on the urban dwellers contributing to the livelihood of the rural ones, usually through remittances from family members living in the city. Hardly anything is known about the reverse flows, i.e. in how far urban households realize part of their livelihood from rural sources. Based on recent research in Nakuru town, Kenya, this paper demonstrates that urban-rural linkages are not only important for the rural households, but are increasingly becoming an important element of the livelihood (or survival) strategies of the urban (poor) households.¹

Introduction

As soon as Opiyo Jamaranda², a civil servant working in Nairobi, receives his KSh. 24,000 salary at the end month, he feels miserable. He knows he is only holding the money momentarily, in trust for its rightful owners as it were. Before the end of the day, he will have deposited KSh. 12,000 in his landlord's bank account before going to the small fast-food restaurant where he has his lunch daily, to pay the owner her dues, usually around KSh. 2,500. In the evening he will pay *Mama Mboga*³, the estate kiosk owner and vegetable vendor where he gets his daily provisions like milk, bread and *sukuma wiki*⁴. The remaining amount goes towards the monthly bulk shopping, water and electricity bills and fare to and from work. His fare to and from work is KSh. 40 each day, which comes to about KSh. 800 a month. By the time he is through, there is nothing much left for an occasional drink with his friends on Fridays. Things are tougher when he has to pay school fees for his two school-going children. But he considers himself lucky because his mother often sends maize and other fresh foodstuff from the village (*Source: Daily Nation Online Edition, Wednesday 10 November 2004*).

This story is similar among many wage earners in other towns of Kenya and sub-Saharan Africa. It is a true reflection of what the majority of urban households go through in order to make ends meet or in order to survive “when there is so much month left at the end of the

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² The name has been changed from the one originally used by the writer.

³ A woman who sells vegetables in the estate is popularly known as *Mama Mboga* to her daily customers.

⁴ The kale is commonly referred to as *sukuma wiki* in Swahili.

money (salary)". The situation is even worse for those who earn less than Opiyo Jamaranda or those without a regular source of income. However, Opiyo Jamaranda is lucky because of the additional food he gets from his rural home.

For urban and rural populations in sub-Saharan Africa, global changes in the last two decades have resulted in deepening social differentiation and increasing poverty (Tacoli 1998, 2002).⁵ Several World Bank, IMF and UNDP reports, including national studies, show that over 40% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is living in absolute poverty or on a Purchasing Power Parity of less than US\$1/day. In fact since the late 1980s, the absolute number of people living on less than a dollar a day in Africa has grown five times more than the figure for Latin America, and twice that for South Asia (World Bank 2001). Based on the same measurement, national studies suggest that in several of the poorest African countries, more than half the urban population can be considered poor, *i.e.* are living below the poverty line.

The impact of both economic crisis and economic reform under structural adjustment on urban centres has been well documented.⁶ Urban economies in sub-Saharan Africa declined markedly during the 1980s and 1990s and urban poverty appears to be increasing in much of the continent. Life in the urban areas has become more expensive while employment in the formal sector has gone down and real wages do not keep up with the price increases or even declined in absolute terms. The standards of living have deteriorated and urban unemployment reached levels never before attained. With the fall in formal sector employment, many former wage earners have moved into the informal sector. Increases in food prices and service charges and cuts in public expenditure on health, education and infrastructure have been felt more severely in the cities and particularly by the low-income groups.

This paper explores the hypothesis that with the present trends of economic hardships, increased cost of living and urban poverty, "falling back" on rural areas and specifically reliance on rural food (as did Opiyo Jamaranda) and income sources is, or has become, increasingly important in the livelihood of many urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, the paper examines the nature, extent and direction of urban-rural linkages. Using some of the general survey results and the in-depth case studies carried out in Nakuru town, Kenya, between 2001 and 2003⁷, this paper examines (1) social reciprocity between urban and rural areas; (2) flows of money and goods between urban and rural areas; (3) split (return) migration; and (4) flow of food from rural to urban households. First, however, a general discussion of urban-rural linkages in sub-Saharan Africa is presented, followed by a brief

⁵ Many sub-Saharan countries are currently facing the negative impact of the global recession in the 1980s, and by implication that of SAPs.

⁶ See e.g. Jamal & Weeks (1988); ILO/JASPA (1992); Stren (1992); Gilbert (1994); Kanji (1996); UNCHS (1996); Potts (1997); Rogerson (1997); Simon (1997); Maxwell (1999); Tacoli (2002); Beauchemin & Bocquier (2003); Odhiambo & Manda (2003).

⁷ The fieldwork for this study was carried out in three phases between 2001 and 2003. The first phase (in 2001) was a general survey of 344 households using a standardized pre-coded questionnaire. The second phase (in 2002) consisted of in-depth interviews or case studies with 16 households drawn from the initial sample. Of these 16 households, 5 were further selected for the third phase – the rural visits (in 2002/2003), which was basically a continuation of the in-depth studies, but in the respondent's rural home or plot.

reflection on the “rural-home-phenomenon” in Africa and thereafter a respondent’s perspective and experience on urban-rural linkages and its changing nature.

Urban-rural linkages in sub-Saharan Africa: an overview of literature

One of the responses to the increased urban poverty involves the strengthening and adaptation of the urban-rural linkages that have always been such an important part of urbanization processes in sub-Saharan Africa (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). However, little attention has been given to wider spatial aspects of urban livelihoods (Tacoli 2002). Many urban households have rural components to their livelihoods and retain strong links with rural areas, while some keep part of their asset base in rural areas. Rural livelihood sources by urban households are embedded in the linkages, interaction and reciprocity that is evident between them and their rural households, homes or areas.

According to Tacoli (*ibid*) rural-urban interactions include *spatial* linkages – flows of people, of goods, of money and other social transactions between towns and countryside – and *sectoral* interactions – “urban” sectors in rural areas (e.g. rural non-farm employment) and “rural” sectors in urban areas (e.g. urban agriculture). Through these interactions or linkages, households increasingly rely on both rural and urban-based resources for their livelihoods – that is, many households straddle between the city and village for their livelihoods (Satterthwaite & Tacoli 2002).

Urban-rural interactions are not a new phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa (Fall 1998; Okali *et al.* 2001). For instance, in the early 1940s, Read (1942) noticed that the majority of (temporarily) urbanized Africans maintained links with their village of origin. Examples across the continent⁸ reveal that migrants still maintain close relations with their rural homes even from a distance: they return to visit; they invest in housing, some in social activities, education and health amenities; they send money and sometimes receive goods or host visiting relatives. Although urban dwellers have always maintained links with the rural areas, economic recession and structural adjustment in the last two decades seems to have caused three fundamental and interrelated changes in urban-rural linkages. The first one concerns the vanishing gap between urban and rural, at least in relation to income and poverty. The second one is about sectoral changes in urban and rural areas. The last one concerns the changing nature of urban-rural linkages: new forms of migration, falling back on rural land or home, flows of food and money, rural farming by urban households, etc. These changes are highlighted below.

Urban versus rural: the vanishing income and poverty gap

About two decades ago, Jamal & Weeks (1988: 274) already observed that due to the global processes described above the “dynamics of income distribution between urban and rural areas has changed”: the urban-rural income gap had substantially narrowed or, in some cases, even closed. Recent studies in sub-Saharan Africa share the same conclusion: that since mid-1970s, economic decline has greatly reduced the gap between real urban incomes and real rural incomes in the region. In addition, and related to this observation, there is a relative shift

⁸ See e.g. In *Kenya* (Bigsten 1996, Warah 1999); *Nigeria* (Okali *et al.* 2001); *Senegal* (Fall 1998); *South Africa* (Smit 1998); *Tanzania* (Tripp 1996, Diyamett *et al.* 2001, Lerise *et al.* 2001); *Zimbabwe* (Rakodi 1995b).

over time in the locus of poverty, from rural towards urban areas (Kanji 1996), “partly because of the effects of recession and adjustments, partly because of the in-migration of the rural poor, and partly because of the increased share of the urban population in the total” (Rakodi 2002b: 30). And although there is still far more rural poverty than urban poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, urban poverty is increasing at a faster rate. Moreover, as mentioned the harsh economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s have been felt even more acutely in the cities than in the rural areas, as life is generally more expensive in urban areas.

Urban versus rural: sectoral changes

Another consequence of these processes concerns the sectoral changes in both rural and urban areas (Tacoli 1997, 1998, 2002). In general, non-agricultural rural activities have become a wide-spread feature in sub-Sahara Africa. Typical urban activities like e.g. manufacturing are increasingly taking place in rural areas as well (see e.g. Bryceson 1996, 2001, 2002a). On the other hand, agriculture – an activity typically associated with the rural areas – has become a widespread phenomenon and a permanent part of the landscape in most sub-Saharan African towns and cities (see e.g. Maxwell 1995; Mlozi 1996; Obudho & Foeken 1999; Mbiba 2000; Foeken forthcoming). This is sometimes referred to as the “ruralization” of African cities (Rogerson 1997; Bigsten & Kayizzi-Mugerwa 1992), although this may also occur when rural assets serve as safety valves for urban dwellers (Krüger 1998).

What these changes in the two areas have in common is the element of risk spreading or risk management (Painter 1996): households perform a wide range of different activities in order to maintain a certain level of living or even to avoid starvation. It is nowadays common to find households in both urban and rural areas relying on the combination of agricultural and non-agricultural income sources for their livelihoods. This is what Jamal and Weeks (1988: 288) called the “trader-cum-wage earner-cum-*shamba* growing” class.

Changing nature of urban-rural linkages: the current debate

African urban residents have long maintained strong social and economic links with their rural “home” areas, although the nature of those links has varied over time, as the nature of migration streams has adapted to changing economic and political circumstances, and from country to country with variations in factors such as colonial policy, urban history, and land tenure and land availability. The recent era of severe economic decline and structural adjustment has seen such linkages assume a new and vial significance (Potts 1997: 449).

First, new forms of migration have emerged or old ones have intensified and others have slowed down (Tacoli 1997). There are indications that the rate of rural-urban migration has decreased, while return migration, *i.e.* from the city to the rural “home”, is emerging (Tripp 1996; Baker 1997; Potts 1997; Tacoli 1998; Okali *et al.* 2001) and circular migration between urban and rural areas is increasing (Smit 1998). A review of recent empirical evidence on migration and urbanization in Francophone West Africa suggests that economic crisis may increase circular migration between towns and villages (Beauchemin & Bocquier 2003). While acknowledging that urban out-migration is not a new phenomenon, Beauchemin & Bocquier (*ibid*: 10) argue that:

It seems to be increasing in importance (...). In addition to the traditional return flows of migrants, a new kind of urban-to-rural migration, linked to economic crisis, has appeared in West African countries since the early 1980s.

Second, rural links have become vital safety-valves and welfare options for urban people who are very vulnerable to economic fluctuations (Gugler 1991; Potts 1997: 461; Smit 1998). There is evidence of significant shifts in the nature of transfers of goods and cash between urban and rural households, in the sense that remittances from urban to rural areas are declining (Bah *et al.* 2003) and transfers of food from rural to urban areas are increasing, not only in amount and frequency but also in importance:

It appears that far more food is now being brought in from rural areas, which of course greatly enhances urban residents' vested interests in maintaining their social and economic rural links. These transfers can rely on surpluses generated by existing rural kin or on urban residents returning in the rainy season to cultivate, which they would probably not choose to do if they could afford urban food prices or could gain access to sufficient land in town to grow food. On the other hand, there is some evidence that remittances to rural areas are declining as urban households find it harder to spare any money (Potts 1997: 466).

Remittances from urban to rural areas are declining despite simultaneously being important for rural households. The decline in rural remittances in amount and real terms is a consequence of the increasing employment insecurity and cost of living in town. Greater economic hardship and other important aspects such as the increasing cost of education, health care, housing and food has led to migrants sending less in remittances than before. Despite the decline in rural remittances, social links between migrants and their home areas remain as strong as ever (Tacoli 2002). For many migrants, this is not only a part of their social identity but also a way of spreading their assets (and risk) across space and maintaining a safety net which helps in times of economic and social insecurity in cities (Bah *et al.* 2003: 20).

Despite the above observation by Potts (1997) that farming (or own food production) is an important element in the livelihood of many urban dwellers, studies focusing on *rural* farming by *urban* households, have so far received little attention. Except for a recent survey in Windhoek, Namibia by Frayne (2004), what is known about the topic is derived from mostly urban studies that were broader in scope and usually recognized the aspect of rural livelihood sources but only in passing. Though limited in the present focus, the general scenario that arises from these continent-wide studies⁹ is that the importance of rural farming (food, income) for the livelihood of urban households should not be underestimated.

Third, to reduce the household's expenses, a husband and his wife (or wives) may dissociate their residences with the woman (or women) and all or some of the children returning to the village while the man remains in town (see e.g. Rakodi 1995b; Potts 1997). In some cases, as seen above, the wife goes to the rural areas for a substantial period during the

⁹ See e.g. In *Botswana* (Kruger 1998); *Congo-Kinshasa* (Makwala 1972, Nicolai 1989); *Kenya* (Foeken, forthcoming, Foeken & Owuor 2000a, 2001, Lee-Smith & Memon 1994, Lee-Smith *et al.* 1987, Mwangi 1995, Mwangi & Foeken 1996, Versleijen 2002); *Nigeria* (Andrae 1992, Gugler 1971, 1991); *Senegal* (Fall 1998); *Tanzania* (Bah *et al.* 2003, Baker 1996, Tripp 1996); *Zimbabwe* (Drakakis-Smith 1992, Kamete 1998, Muzvidziwa 2001, Potts & Mutambirwa 1990, Rakodi 1995b).

main agricultural season and visits at other times of the year for shorter periods. With the wife returning home to engage in farming and children to attend school in the village, the family can better face economic hazards (Beauchemin & Bocquier 2003) and at the same time the rural base kept as “a safe haven” (Bigsten 1996).

As a cost-cutting measure in town, fostering urban children at home is also common among the female-headed households (see e.g. Muzvidziwa 2001; Nelson 2001). The high costs of education in urban schools may push parents to return children to rural areas where schools and other related expenses are relatively cheaper (Potts 1997). Other reasons for leaving family members behind in rural areas are lack of income to support them and lack of housing (Potts and Mutambirwa 1990).

Tacoli (1998) explains that households may be “multi-spatial”, with some members residing in rural areas and others in towns. Muzvidziwa (2001: 95) adds that besides being a cost-cutting measure, the practice of “split-household residential patterns” by urban households is a form of mobilizing both rural and urban resources. For Beall (2002), such arrangements support the argument that the livelihood strategies of urban households cannot be seen in isolation from their wider context. Potts (1997) makes it clear that the decline in real incomes may have encouraged the re-emerging practice of urban residents to leave some people behind or send some home. She goes on to explain that this practice is particularly reinforced by urban households’ desperate need for food: people at home can grow food, some of which can supplement urban sources. Therefore, access to rural assets is, according to Krüger (1998), at least a supplementary if not essential element for securing and stabilizing the livelihood systems of many vulnerable urban households.

Whereas exchanges between urban-based and rural-based households or relatives take place in both directions, flows from rural areas to urban areas are increasingly becoming an important element in the livelihood of urban households particularly in the present circumstances of urban unemployment and poverty. However, the focus has so far predominantly been on “the urban” dwellers contributing to the livelihood of the rural ones, usually through remittances from family members living in the city. Though acknowledged in the last two decades (as is emerging from the above review), the reverse flows, *i.e.* in how far urban households realize part of their livelihood from rural sources, remain poorly understood and under-researched. The present paper is, therefore, an attempt to fill this gap by using Nakuru town, Kenya as a case study. The fact that a large majority of the Nakuru townspeople have access to a rural plot, more often than not back home, is in itself a platform for linkages between the two geographic and social spaces. The next section highlights the ambivalence of urban migrants, with one foot in the transient urban destination and another in the rural areas with which they identify as home.

A “rural home” versus an “urban house”

It is common for the urban Kenyan to identify themselves with a “rural home” and an “urban house”, partly explaining why the majority are never permanent migrants in towns. For example, until recently the government did not recognize Nairobi as one’s district of birth or home district, except for people of Asian, Arab or European origin. True to the assumption, most urban dwellers are migrants from their areas of origin and have inheritance rights to the

land “back home.” Of unique importance is the fact that specific ethnic groups are known to originate, settle or reside in specific areas of Kenya.

A rural home is *normally* the ancestral land that is inherited from father to son. Traditionally, the daughter does not qualify to inherit her father’s ancestral land because she is expected to get married and make her “home” in the husband’s family.¹⁰ The ambivalence of urban migrants, with one foot in the transient urban destination and another in the rural areas with which they identify as home, is a well-established phenomenon of African migration (Oucho 1996). In Kenya, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the urban bias of development to which migrants respond accordingly is symbiotic with their rural bias toward home – the place to visit periodically, and to which to retire and eventually to be buried.

For example, despite being born and staying in Nakuru town for almost 40 years, this respondent has a high regard for his rural home in Siaya:

“Having a rural home together with a house you call yours is very important, especially for us Luos.¹¹ The rural home is important to me because I can be retrenched from work at any time. That is the place I will go back to...I cannot afford to stay in Nakuru. If I retire, that is the place I will go back to. When anything happens to me or my wife or my children, then we have a home to be buried instead of being thrown [buried] in the public cemetery here in Nakuru. Yes...whatever the case...we must be buried at home. That is our home and never shall we stay in Nakuru forever because these are just but rental houses. Those who do not have a home and a house [at home] are simply lost in town.”

The situation described above provides the basis that the large majority of urban dwellers in Kenya have a rural home, regardless of the circumstances that pushed or pulled them to the urban centres. For example:

Despite the enthusiasm *Alfred*¹² had when he came to Nakuru to look for a job and fend for his family, he does not intend to stay in town for the rest of his life. He indicates that he will “soon” migrate back to his rural home in Siaya because he is just in town for a short period looking for money.

Even in circumstances where a person has bought a plot outside his ancestral home, in case of death the importance of the rural home manifests itself in the disputes regarding where the remains should actually be laid. More often than not, this is done in their ancestral homes unless some peculiar reasons dictate otherwise. For those who (temporarily) cut their ties with the rural homes or maintain them at a low intensity appear to do so primarily because of economic necessity, rather than out of social choice. Generally, a “home” is such an integral part of some Kenyan cultures that many are taken aback when a man dies without a home. Although they do not say it loudly, it is normally the migrant’s wish to be buried in his/her rural home:

¹⁰ Inheritance laws are gradually changing and in some cases girls can inherit their father’s properties in towns.

¹¹ Luo is one of the 42 ethnic communities in Kenya.

¹² The names of all my respondents have been changed to maintain their anonymity and for ease of reference no respondents “share” the same “name”.

Even though *Hester Njeri* identifies herself with Nakuru town and their Rongai plot, it is her wish that she be buried in their rural home in Nyeri, the same place her late husband lays to rest. According to her, the rural plot in Nyeri will be beneficial to their sons in future.

Once married, the spouse (*i.e.* wife) changes her status to become a member of the husband's rural home. In that case the husband is required to build for her a house and to "show" her where to cultivate, as determined and advised by his father or elders. For those in polygamous marriages, every spouse (wife) has her house, normally within the homestead, and a place to cultivate within the family land. The wife is assigned a place to cultivate on the assumption that she should cater for her household's food requirements through cultivation.

Regardless of the reasons for coming to Nakuru town, 56% of the migrants indicated that they would like to "retire to our rural home" or to one of the rural plots, when asked about their (retirement) future plan. Two-fifths of them would like to stay in Nakuru town permanently. For those born in Nakuru, the figures were 47% and 49%, respectively. This is an indication that those born in Nakuru equally associate themselves with their rural homes as does the migrants. Despite being born in Nakuru town, some of them, like the migrants, have inheritance rights to their ancestral land back home. While the heads from high-income households were optimistic of "setting up a home" outside their rural homes, those from the very low-income households were more inclined towards retiring in their rural homes. This is attributed to the fact that the very low-income households cannot afford the ever increasing value of land in terms of purchase price, besides the cultural attachment to their rural homes.

Urban-rural linkages: a respondent's perspective and experience

William, a pensioner, is categorical that those living in towns maintain continuous and close links with their rural homes for various reasons:

"First, most people in Kenya are still identified with where they come from. Second, upon death, the family member is naturally transported to his or her rural home for burial. Third, unlike today, most of us were born and brought up at home where our parents and other relations continue to live. Fourth, many Kenyans, me included, cannot afford to buy a house in town and because of that I am planning to go home soon...I cannot live on my pension in town."

It is for these reasons that *William* and his wife maintain close links with their rural home in Kakamega, albeit with varying degrees over their married life. *William* argues that the benefits one gets from his or her rural home are socially and economically entrenched in the linkages:

"Naturally one has to go home to visit his or her parents and other relatives. I mean...only a lost person will refuse to go and see his parents or relatives at home. It is natural that when we go home from town, we leave our parents or relatives some money for their use. After all, why do you work in town? Sometimes we buy them things like sugar, cooking fat, tealeaves or salt. In appreciation, they give us maize, beans, bananas or millet to bring to town to their grandchildren."

He says that even before their ancestral land was sub-divided amongst the sons in 1985; his mother was fond of giving him maize, beans, millet and bananas to bring to Nakuru, any time

he went home. On his part, he sent to his parents about KSh. 250 on a monthly basis “despite them having a good source of income from planting tea.” However, he admits that the food he carried from home became more important as his household size increased from three in the late 1960s to nine in mid 1980s. But “it took a shorter period to use the food from home in mid 1980s than it was in the 1960s.” William further explained the changing nature of urban-rural linkages:

“I think things are now changing. The food we get from home is becoming more and more important to us. It is beyond just carrying food from my parents to their grandchildren in town. It is no longer a normal thing...it is for survival And because of that, we cultivate our own *shamba*¹³ at home as a source of food.”

It is with this realization that William’s wife started to cultivate her own *shamba* at home in 1985 to supplement their food sources as they got more children and as life in town became expensive. In 1992 “as life became difficult for us in town” William’s wife finally went to stay at home with some of the children. Before his retirement, William worked with the Municipal Council of Nakuru as an *askari*¹⁴ and later as a clerk, for 35 years.

Social reciprocity between urban and rural areas

Social reciprocity (or interactions) between urban and rural areas can be analyzed within the context of regular visits that occur between household and family members of the two geographical spaces. By the last quarter of 2001, *i.e.* by the time of the general survey, 79% of the Nakuru town households had visited their rural homes and/or plots.¹⁵ These visits were made by the household head and/or spouse of the male head, if married. Table 1 presents a summary of the characteristics on visits to rural areas by urban households. These characteristics will be discussed below.

Purpose of visiting rural plots

There were various reasons for visiting the rural plots. Typical of kinship and family ties, urban dwellers are obliged to now and then visit their family members and relatives who stay in the rural areas. Essentially, these visits are meant to maintain and foster the same kinship and family relations. It is for these reasons that about three-quarters of the plots were visited by the Nakuru town households “to see or visit” the rural family members and relatives (see Table 1). For both migrants and non-migrants, and especially the urban poor, this is not only part of their social identity but also an important safety net during periods of economic and social insecurity in the cities.

So strong is the bond that urban households continue to visit the rural areas regardless of distance from Nakuru town and increased transport cost. Frayne (2004: 500) maintains that “...without these visits, and without the social cohesion provided by the regular interaction,

¹³ A *shamba* is a Swahili word with the same meaning as garden, plot or cultivable field.

¹⁴ These are local authority by-laws enforcement officers.

¹⁵ At the time of the survey, all the respondents were asked if the household head and/or spouse(s) had visited their rural homes (or any one of their rural plots). It is important to note that a large proportion of the rural plots were located at the “rural homes” of the (male) household heads.

the strength of rural-urban links would be weakened, as migrants lose touch with their rural situations.” He argues that strong ties between urban and rural households are imperative for a similarly strong reciprocity.

Table 1: Visits to the rural plot in the last quarter of 2001 (%)

Purpose of visit (by plot: N=349; % > 100)	To see/visit rural family	71.1
	Attend to rural farming activities	55.9
	Attend to cultural ceremonies	29.5
	“Holiday” from town life	24.9
Number of visits (by plot: N=349)	Less than 5 visits	54.7
	5 to 9 visits	16.0
	10+ visits	29.2
Frequency of visit (by plot: N=349)	More than monthly	17.4
	Monthly	21.2
	Every two to four months	37.9
	Once/twice a year	23.5
Change of frequency over time (by household: N=327)	Decreased	54.4
	Increased	18.3
	No significant change	27.7

Source: 2001 Survey.

In more than half of the plots, one of the reasons for visiting was farming related, that is, to attend to (rural) farming activities. This is a confirmation of the importance of rural plots to the urban households concerned. From time to time the household head and/or spouse visited the rural plot to supervise or participate in the on-going farming activities. Besides “seeing” their rural family members and relatives, the high-income households are relatively focussed in their rural visits. For example, 65% of them visited their rural plots specifically for farming related activities against 46% from the very low-income households who did the same.

The third reason for visiting rural areas is to attend to family functions and events such as weddings and funerals. One’s absence in a relative’s funeral is never regarded lightly by the kith and kin. Close relatives are expected to join the bereaved in mourning and to finally lay “one of them” to his or her final resting place – at home. It is believed that by doing so, “you will also be buried by others”. Such occasions also provide an opportunity for the town dwellers to pass through their own rural homes or to meet their relatives attending the same function. Lastly, it is a practice for some townspeople to visit the rural areas during annual leave, school holidays, or during long weekends and public holidays just to get out of the town environment.

Conversely, visits to rented plots¹⁶ were made for a specific intention because they are not regarded as rural homes. For example, plots in Rongai and Subukia were rented solely for cultivation by urban households. In that case, the visits to these rented plots were mainly to supervise the farming activities taking place there. Since the plots are near Nakuru town the

¹⁶ As a livelihood strategy, some Nakuru town dwellers rent the rich agricultural lands bordering the municipality boundaries, for cultivation purposes. It is a common practice among land-owning communities outside the municipality to lease patches of arable land to individuals for one or multiple cropping seasons as is the case in Rongai and Subukia. In this study, this is part of rural farming by urban households.

supervision took not more than a day. But with adequate arrangement and relations, one could spend more days. For example:

As much as most of the work is left for his sister to supervise, *Reuben and Rita* frequent the plot they rent in Rongai to check on how the crops are doing. Reuben's sister had this to say: 'Both Reuben and Rita come here every other time depending on how free they are. During the agricultural season, they can come three times in a month to see how the work is progressing. During harvesting, they come every weekend because there is a lot of work and decisions to be made about what to do with the harvest. I also visit them frequently, taking them small amounts of maize and beans because transporting them in bulk can be difficult. Sometimes they send their son to come for maize as you have witnessed.'¹⁷

The very-low income households tend to maintain links with the rural areas through "just-to-see-them" visits. Over three-quarters (78%) of the very low-income households visited their rural plots "to see or visit" the rural family members compared to 58% from the high-income category. However, we have to bear in mind that such visits are quite often characterised and embedded within other reasons to visit the rural area.

Frequency of visits

The frequency at which urban households visit the rural areas differ from household to household and depend on many factors: distance of rural area from Nakuru town, purpose of visit and relations with relatives living in the rural area. On average, we can say that by the last quarter of 2001, half of the plots had been visited less than five times while another one-quarter experienced regular visits of at least 10 times (see Table 1). Due to financial constraints, the low to very low-income households were not able to visit their rural plots as regularly as those from the high-income households. Almost all (93%) the household heads or spouses of the latter group had visited at least one of their rural plots compared to two-thirds from the very low-income category. During the same period, 84% of the plots accessible to the very low-income group had been visited not more than five times compared to 37% of the high-income group.

The simple relationship between distance and frequency visits is that the nearer the plot or home from Nakuru town, the higher the interaction and possibly the reciprocity. For example, *Baba Shiko*¹⁸ is able to travel to his rural home in Nyahururu (about 100kms from Nakuru town) after every two weeks. Likewise, his wife is a regular visitor in Nakuru town. The number of days spent in the rural areas per visit varied from one to seven days and in a couple of cases, one month. Due to commitment in town, the preferred length of stay in the rural areas for any given visit was between one and seven days. Even then a large majority of them spend only one or two days, preferably during weekends and public holidays. Longer visits are made during annual leave, school holidays or during Christmas and New Year break. Christmas holiday is traditionally the time when people living in town returned home to celebrate with their relatives and "eat Christmas together".

¹⁷ During this particular visit, Reuben's son accompanied the researcher to Rongai. He brought with him an empty bag so that he could carry some maize back to Nakuru.

¹⁸ Literally: father of Shiko, the first born. It is common in Kenya to address people in this way as soon as the first child is born.

For example, this middle-aged male respondent still maintains his parents' tradition of going home in December:

"I maintain links with my home since I was young. Even though my father lived and worked in Nakuru town, it was a tradition for us to go home in Siaya once a year in December. My parents liked celebrating Christmas at home. It is the preferred month of visiting home and re-uniting with most of your relatives after a long time. The children get to know and play with their cousins. I do the same even now. I prefer going home with my family in December. I make sure that my annual leave coincides with this."

That does not however prevent his wife from going home more than once in a year. During this interview in October 2002, she had already travelled home twice and intended to go there again towards the end of the year:

"I go home more often than my husband. I prefer going home in April, August and obviously in December, all during school holidays. In that case, I do not have to worry about who will prepare the children for school in my absence. In many instances, my husband sends me to supervise and help in farming and to find out how they are doing. I do not have a definite number of days I stay at home. It can be one day or two weeks, depending on what has taken me there."

For half of the households, the frequency of visiting rural areas – as perceived by the respondent – has decreased with time: that is, they visit the rural areas less frequently now than before. For about one-quarter there is no significant change while for another one-sixth the frequency has increased (see Table 1). The decrease is partly a response to the general increase in the costs of travelling, especially for the urban poor and those whose plots are far away from Nakuru municipality. About two-thirds (65%) of the very low-income households visit their rural plots less frequently now than before compared to 44% of the high-income households who experienced the same trend. Moreover, a further analysis by location of plot shows that more than half (57%) of the plots located in the "outer ring" and 46% of those located in "Nakuru district" have experienced this decrease.¹⁹

To reduce the transport costs, some households no longer go home with the entire family, except for once in a year or two years. However, it is common for both the husband and wife to attend a close relative's funeral. Others, like the case below, are simply unable to frequently afford the high transport costs to his home in Busia. Despite that, he continues to maintain links with his wife at home whenever an opportunity arises:

"Until the 1990s, I visited my family at home regularly, thrice or four times in a year. Moreover, I never missed going home for my annual leave. I can no longer afford that because the transport cost has become unbearable and life is more expensive than it was. As much as I would have liked to go home more often than I do now, I am restrained by the high transport cost to my home in Busia. However, I rely on relatives who often go home while my wife relies on relatives who come to Nakuru or who are coming back to Nakuru from home. Through that, she is able to send me some maize, sweet potatoes, groundnuts, simsim or millet. I am also able to send her some money here and there. As a result of my unreliable salary, I do not have a regular schedule of sending

¹⁹ The distance variable was operationalized as follows: (1) "Nakuru district", (2) the "inner ring" consisting of the neighbouring districts to Nakuru – Kiambu, Nyandarua, Laikipia, Baringo, Kericho and Narok, and (3) the "outer ring" consisting of all other districts.

money to my family nowadays. When a relative is going home and I have some money with me then I can give him or her about KSh. 500 to take to my wife. Sometimes I am forced to borrow money from friends. Last year when one of my neighbours who hail from the same area as mine was going home, I gave him KSh. 600 to take to *mama watoto nyumbani*²⁰. When coming back, he was given maize and millet to bring to me.”

The same case applies to *Sofia*, a single mother whose son is living at home. As much as she is willing to visit her mother and son every now and then, she is unable to do that because of the high transport costs. She needs over KSh. 500 for a return trip to her mother’s home in Kapedo (Turkana District). According to her, there are no public service vehicles to Kapedo, except for lorries and trucks.

The comparison between the transport cost now and in the past is better described below by this widow whose rural home is in Nyeri:

“The bus fare was very low by then...we paid about 10 shillings in the 1960s, 50 in the 1970s, 80 in the 1980s and 120 in early 1990s. Passengers were hardly charged for extra luggage. The fare is now not less than 350 shillings and one is charged uncaringly for any extra luggage by those rowdy and rude *matatu* touts. Travelling home is even more expensive if one has to use more than one vehicle.”

In addition to what has been discussed above, there are circumstances when visiting the rural plot can increase or decrease for a certain period of time during the year. It can be because of sickness of a close relative at home or attending to a particular undertaking. For example, when his first wife was sick, *Reuben* made several trips to his rural home in Siaya to find out how she was doing, besides carrying medication for her:

“When my first wife was sick, I used to travel home after every two weeks to see her and to take for her drugs which I bought from Nakuru. My brother’s wife was very helpful because she looked after her and our last-born son during this time. Sometimes I had to rush home when they called me that she did not sleep well.”

In a different circumstance from the above, *Alfred* made several trips to his rural home during the period his new house was under construction. During that period, he travelled after every two weeks to make sure everything was in order. He brought with him money for building materials and for paying the *fundi* (person building the house).

Apparently, having a house at home may influence the migrant’s frequency and number of days he spends in the rural area. In some communities, men are not allowed to sleep in their father’s house and this may possibly hinder them from going home frequently, *i.e.* before putting up their own house. After completing his house at home, *Reuben* is nowadays much more comfortable to “regularly” visit his home:

“I am now able to go home more times than before, and with my family. I am no longer worried about where to spend the night. I can confidently walk home at anytime and spend one or two days.”

²⁰ Literally: mother (*mama*) of the children (*watoto*) at home (*nyumbani*).

His mother is more than happy because:

“These days my son can come home at any time even when we least expect him. This is their home and nothing should prevent them from coming here...He does not need a reason to come to his home...They come home at anytime, whether to see us or not.”

The “rural-to-town” visits

The flow of visits is not only from Nakuru town to the rural plots but also the other way round. Eighty-six percent of the respondents confirmed that their rural family members and relatives do visit them in Nakuru town now and then and for various reasons. The reasons for the reverse flow are quite similar to why urban households visit their rural areas. Again, the main reason is the normal “to-see-them” visits between close relations. Besides that, rural family members and relatives may come to Nakuru town to get medical attention, to collect farm inputs, for family ceremonies, or “when in a problem” that needs the urban household’s attention. Some bring money from the sale of farm produce while others come for money for various purposes such as for farming activities or school fees. Generally, by so doing they bring with them food from the farm and in return they go back with purchased food items from Nakuru town.

Even then, the rural-to-urban visits are decreasing because urban households can no longer afford to accommodate their relatives in town for a long time as told below:

“These days we do not just entertain those unplanned visits from any relative like long ago. We cannot afford to accommodate them for long even if by any chance they come. Life in town is expensive and one has to budget for every single cent s/he earns. I do not even see how they can afford the high transport costs from Kisii to Nakuru. We prefer planned visits with a specific purpose. In that case, we can send them transport to come and plan for their short stay.”

This is however not the case with *multi-spatial households* where the wife and children stay at home. In such cases, rural-to-urban visits are quite similar in nature as the urban-to-rural visits described above. Part of the household staying at home, *i.e.* wife and children, are bound to visit the urban household, *i.e.* the husband/father, on a regular basis as is told by *Alfred’s* wife:

“I come to Nakuru frequently to see my husband. I can stay for a week or even one month. There are many reasons that can make me visit him. For example, I can come to pick school fees for the children; I can come to see my friends in Nakuru; I can bring them food from home...but the most important thing is that I come to see my husband the same way he comes at home.”

Economic interactions: flow of money and goods between urban and rural areas

About three-quarters of the Nakuru town households contributed financially to the households in the rural areas (Table 2). This is in line with the well established tradition in which migrants in towns remit money back home. The frequency of sending money back home and the amount sent is varied and depends on several factors and circumstances. Although town dwellers send money back home regardless of their income categories, a larger proportion of the high-income households were able to achieve that and to some extent more frequently

than the low to very low-income households. For example, in 2000, the large majority (83%) of the high-income households sent money back home while only one-third of the very low-income households were able to do that. Exchange of money also occurs when the urban households visit their rural plots: 89% of the high-income households and 56% of the very low-income households admitted that they *normally* give money to their parents or other close relatives during most of their visits to the rural areas.

Table 2: Financial flows between urban and rural households (%)

Remitting money to rural households (N=327)	Yes	73.1
	No	26.9
Frequency of sending money (N=239)	More than monthly	5.0
	Monthly	35.1
	Every two to four months	41.4
	Once or twice a year	18.4
Reasons for sending money (N=239; % > 100)	General up-keep	90.4
	Farming purposes	57.3
	Pay fees	23.8
Change in frequency of sending money (N=239)	Decreased	54.8
	Increased	19.7
	No significant change	25.5

Source: 2001 Survey.

The reasons for sending money to the rural households were basically for general upkeep, *i.e.* to support the family at home or as most of the respondents said “money to buy sugar”. Money is also sent for farming purposes or for paying school fees. Nine out of every ten households sent money to support their rural households, about three-fifths did the same for farming purposes and one-quarter for paying fees (see Table 2). On specific requests and demands, money can be sent home for festivity, funeral expenses and for health care of the ailing relatives.

As a result of the harsh economic conditions and the increasing urban poverty, it is not surprising that the frequency of sending money to the rural households has decreased over time. Given the tension between rising need and falling wages, it is not unexpected that half of the households in Nakuru send money back home less frequently now than before. One-quarter did not experience any change while for one-fifth the frequency has somehow increased (see Table 2). The decrease in remitting money to the rural households is being felt more by the low to very low-income households. The recent decline in the formal urban economy in Kenya has reduced the income earning opportunities of urban migrants, thereby diminishing their potential to send money back home.

However, a grandmother we found in one of the rural homes argued that exchange of money and goods between parents and their children is mutual. For that matter, there is nothing, according to her, decreasing or increasing about it:

“My son has always been very good to us. Although life is expensive in town, he can still manage to send us something small through the post office or through our many relatives living in Nakuru. He sends us whatever God has put in his hands. I never complain when he cannot afford to. We appreciate whatever small we get from him.”

As much as urban households send money back home, there are indications that the *reverse* is also true where urban households also get money from the rural plots: 5% of the household heads (and/or spouses) who visited the rural plots brought back with them money from there while 3% of the rural family members who visited the urban households brought along with them some money from the rural plots. The flow of goods between urban and rural areas was not easy to capture because of its complexity and broadness. Goods flow from urban households to the rural areas in terms of presents (e.g. clothes), building materials, farm inputs, etc. On the other hand, there are signs of buying food items cheaply from the rural markets and later sold in Nakuru town at a profit. For example:

In the course of her business of selling vegetables and fish by the roadside in Nakuru town, *Reuben's* wife (Rita) brought *omena* (small type of fish) from the home area to sell in Nakuru. Between August and October *omena* is abundantly available in the local markets around Lake Victoria and at a very low price. At that particular time, a 2kg tin (*gorogoro*) of *omena* at home is about half the price of the same amount in Nakuru town. She occasionally did the same when mangoes are plenty at home. On the other hand, Rita is fond of going home with some cabbages, carrots, Irish potatoes and onions, not for sale but for consumption. These food items, according to her, are generally cheaper in Nakuru than they are at *Reuben's* home. The quantities she carries depend on affordability and convenience during each successive travel and exchange. During the recent funerals they experienced, *Reuben* and Rita did most of their purchases in Nakuru town. According to *Reuben*, "...we made sure that we did enough shopping here in Nakuru. The basic things like sugar, cooking fat, salt, tealeaves and soap were purchased cheaply from the supermarket. In addition, my wife carried enough cabbages, *sukuma wiki*, onions and tomatoes."

Split (return) migration

In addition to the reciprocity presented above, there is an emerging evidence of new forms of urban-rural linkages where part of the urban household, especially wife to the male head and/or children, is sent to the rural areas as a response to the increasing cost of living in town. Data from the general survey reveals that in about one-third of the married households, the wife and children had *ever* stayed in the rural areas due to various reasons. Moreover, by the time of the survey, 39 households could be considered as *multi-spatial*, *i.e.* households where the wife to the male head was *actually* staying at home, most of them together with their children. Some have lived at home almost immediately after their marriage while others went to stay at home at various stages of their marriage.

The primary reason for sending part of the urban household members to the rural areas is more economic than social (Table 3). Part of the urban household was sent to the rural area mainly because there was not enough money to support them in town and that, for the children, education is cheaper at home.²¹ By so doing, the wife concentrated on rural farming as a way of producing food for the family.

After 12 years of town life, *Alfred's* wife was forced to go and stay at home in 2001 because life in town had become harder and harder. According to her:

²¹ By the time of the survey, free primary education in Kenya was not yet implemented.

“My husband does not have enough income to support us in town. His carpentry business has not been doing well for the past few years. This has been his main income source since 1989 when he married me. Since we had access to the rural plot and given that the cost of living is relatively cheaper at home, we decided to go and stay there. My husband is now staying alone in Nakuru.”

Table 3: Reasons for sending wife and children to stay at home (%)

	Wife (N=89)*	Children (N=73)*
Not enough money in town	29	38
To concentrate on farming	73	---
Problem of housing	16	15
Education is cheaper at home	---	44

Source: 2001 Survey. * Only for those whose wife or children had ever stayed at home.

Besides economic considerations, *Reuben* prevailed upon his first wife to go and stay at home in 2000 because of his second marriage:

“It does not matter whether I could afford to take care of them in Nakuru or not. Yes, it is expensive. But again, the two could not share the same house. One of them had to stay at home and obviously it was the first wife.”

For *Mama Shiko*, it was the loss of a regular source of income when her husband retired from the civil service. Instead of staying in town during her husband’s retirement, she decided to go and live at their rural home in Nyahururu in 1991 and to concentrate on farming. According to her, *Baba Shiko*’s “informal” business was not quite reliable, *i.e.* his income was not as regular as before and as a new venture there were other risks involved.

For the same economic reasons, *Baba Karo* who earns a monthly income of KSh. 4,500 was unable to take care of his wife and five children in Nakuru, let alone fitting in his one room house:

“A few years after our marriage, I preferred that my wife stays at home because my salary was, and still is, too small to stay with them here. I had a house at home and there was land for her to cultivate. She normally visits me at least once a year and I also visit them whenever I can. Without her accepting to stay at home, I could not have survived with all of them in Nakuru. She gets most of their food requirements from the *shamba*. I am therefore left to concentrate on looking for school fees and once in a while sending them something small for sugar and salt.”

In a couple of households, the reasons were basically socio-cultural: to build a homestead, to get to know the home and parents-in-law, to take care of the sickly parents or to fulfil other traditional rites.²² Even when the children are not accompanied by their mother, it is common for them to be sent home to stay with their grandparents when the household experiences economic stress and strained food availability:

“At the moment, our last son is staying at home with his grandmother. He recently did a course in Nakuru but was not lucky to get a job. Being unemployed, there is not enough money to take care of him here in Nakuru. He is better off at home.”

²² One respondent informed me that her community required that she stays at home after her first birth.

The lower the income the more likely that *ruralization* process takes place in the urban household. About twice as many wives from the very low-income households had ever stayed at home than the ones from high-income households (50% versus 26%). The very low to low-income households did it as a coping strategy, *i.e.* because of lack of income to support them in town. Through this practice, ties between urban and rural households are enhanced while at the same time reducing the food demand and consumption of urban households. The burden of providing the daily food requirements for a large household where few are in gainful employment is immense. This strategy of *ruralizing* the urban household therefore helps to minimize the measures of meeting the household's actual food-shortage.

Flow of food from rural to urban households

Although one may argue that rural-to-urban food transfers have always existed, it has never been systematically documented. As part of the complex socio-economic ties it is common to observe exchange of food items occurring between urban and rural households. More often than not, when the urban household members visit their rural counterparts they carried with them purchased items such as salt, sugar, milk, bread, tealeaves, cooking fat, etc. In return, they were given food from the *shamba* to bring back to town for consumption. The most common were green maize, local vegetables, sweet potatoes, cassava, maize or millet flour²³, groundnuts, fruits and chicken. These “foods” were ideally regarded as not commonly available to the town dweller. The exchange was widespread between parents living at home and children who migrated to towns as told by this respondent:

“My mother was very active in farming. Whenever we visited her at home she gave us some maize flour, sweet potatoes, groundnuts and bananas to bring to Nakuru. We in turn took to her sugar, salt and cooking fat.”

As is the case with *William*, this female respondent confirms that the exchange occurred naturally because reciprocity is embedded in the African culture, however small it may be:

“Naturally, and because I take them some sugar and salt, they reciprocate by giving me a bunch of bananas, two to three handfuls of local vegetables and some millet flour to take to their son and grandchildren in Nakuru.”

Similarly, when the rural family members visited the urban household, they brought with them food from the *shamba* and went back with purchased food and non-food items from town. However, with the high cost of living in town, households are increasingly relying on their own rural production for food and money. Half of the households in Nakuru municipality who had access to a rural plot could be classified as ‘rural crop cultivators’ – that is *urban* households practicing *rural* crop cultivation. On the other hand, one-third of the households could be classified as ‘rural livestock keepers’ – urban households practicing rural livestock keeping. A large majority of them were “mixed rural farmers”, practicing both crop

²³ Some people still prefer locally grinded maize flour than the purchased sifted maize meal or flour. Millet flour is preferred for porridge.

cultivation and livestock keeping. As presented in detail elsewhere, the need for additional food income is an important cause for Nakuru households to engage in rural farming.²⁴

Food from own rural production reaches the urban household through the urban-rural linkages. Urban households are progressively more involved in rural farming as a source of food than relying on “food gifts” that emanated from and intertwined within social reciprocity between the migrant and his/her relatives at home. Though reciprocity still exists and in various forms, this particular one is shifting from merely receiving food gifts to producing own food from the rural areas. The last section of this paper presents a case example which is, by and large, representative of the rural-to-urban food flows.

Rural-to-urban food flows: the case of Alfred and Alice

Through their own rural food production in Siaya *Alfred* and *Alice*, were able to survive in Nakuru “throughout the year without much strain”. During the period she lived in Nakuru with Alfred, Alice made regular visits to their rural home in Siaya “to see her mother-in-law and to see how the crops were doing”. After the harvest, she normally brought with her to Nakuru, on average and in total of several trips in a year, about 1½ bag of maize for *unga* (flour) and *githeri*²⁵, ½ a bag of beans, ¼ bag of cassava, and ½ a bag of sorghum for *uji* (porridge), a few cabbages, onions, fruits and *sukuma wiki*.

Besides that, when Alfred’s mother visited them in Nakuru, she carried with her small quantities of produce from the *shamba*. Once or twice in a year she brought with her some vegetables, cassava, maize, beans and fruits which “pushed them for some few days”. Likewise, when Alfred and Alice visited their home, they occasionally came back with some food for the family, “but not as much as they did a few years before Alice went to stay at home”, *i.e.* when life became expensive and they had to rely more on food from their *shamba* at home.

During the first five years into their marriage, Alfred and Alice maintained a regular linkage with their rural home in Siaya, not only through visitations but also through sending money. Similarly, Alfred’s mother used to visit them in Nakuru quite often. This was possible because the bus fare was generally affordable²⁶, Alfred’s job was doing relatively well and they had only two young children and a relative to look after. However, after 1996 the household had more children to feed, including two relatives they stayed with. Moreover, some of the children were already in school while Alfred’s business had started doing poorly.

The implication in this situation was a change in the way Alfred and Alice organized their rural visits while at the same time maintaining a strong linkage with the rural home. Instead of both of them visiting home together and with children, one of them did that after every three months. More often than not, the responsibility fell on Alice who, by then, had increased her reliance on rural crop cultivation to “feed the urban household”, which had already increased from three in 1990, to five in 1995 and to nine in 2000. She visited home not just to “see” them as before but also to supervise her farming activities and to bring back with her some of

²⁴ In my forthcoming book (Owuor forthcoming) the practice of rural farming by urban households and the importance of rural farming for the urban households are discussed in detail as separate chapters. Though related, this paper is particularly interested in the flows and exchanges.

²⁵ A meal of maize and beans cooked together.

²⁶ For about KSh. 250 one could comfortably reach home as opposed to more than KSh. 500 currently charged.

the harvest to Nakuru. In other words, they travelled home when it was absolutely necessary, like the visits Alice made, during December holidays and funerals of close relatives. At the same time, Alfred sent his mother money not with the same regularity as before, but “at any time and whatever little he could afford” because his mother benefited from the food cultivated at home, as well.

As a tradition, when Alice or Alfred visited their rural home, they carried with them purchased items like sugar, salt, tealeaves, and other commodities, which they felt were necessary for the family members at home. Although they continued with the practice, they carried less variety, smaller quantities and mainly for Alfred’s mother. Moreover, it all depended on their capability at that particular period. For example, as told by Alice:

“We could afford to buy Alfred’s mother 2kgs of sugar, 2bars of soap, 1kg of blue band, 1kg of kimbo, 1kg of salt, 1 large packet of tea leaves, 2 loaves of bread, 2kgs packet of wheat flour and other small things here and there. But before I came home, we could no longer afford to do that. We carried for her 1kgs of sugar, 500grams of kimbo, a small packet of salt and a small packet of tealeaves. No more things like bread, blue band, soap, or wheat flour.”

For the period Alice and her co-wife have been at home, Alfred’s visiting frequency to the rural area has again increased. He now visits²⁷ his family after every two or three months. With the family at home, Alfred gets most of his food requirements in Nakuru from home. As a result, he is able to send them “some little money depending on the profit he makes”. On the other hand, his wives also visit him in Nakuru about four times in a year. During these visits, they make sure that they have carried “enough” maize, beans and sorghum for Alfred.

Emerging issues and concluding remarks

The protracted and deep-rooted economic crisis that has affected nearly every country in sub-Saharan Africa has adversely impacted on the well-being of the majority of people. As a consequence, many Africans have experienced a decline in their welfare owing to a fall in real incomes and declining social sector expenditure per head. Urban unemployment and poverty have risen markedly as a result of recession and the implementation of structural adjustment and economic recovery programmes since the early 1980s. This has had a substantial impact on the quality of life of many urban residents.

All the examples presented in this paper are by and large “poor” households. Were they to rely on their formal wages or earnings from their informal sector businesses, they would not be able to survive. The impossibility of staying alive on typical urban wages in Africa has been dubbed the “wages puzzle” by Jamal and Weeks (1993). That people do survive is testimony to their ingenuity, determination, and sheer hard work – a host of coping strategies have developed. One of these is falling back on rural livelihoods sources. Although the types of interaction examined here, and their effects, should not be overly generalized, a pattern can be discerned which may be used to gain an understanding of the emerging relationship between urban households and their rural homes (areas or plots).

²⁷ According to Alice, Alfred frequents home to “see” his family.

First, the case of *Alfred* and *Alice* (like many others) illustrates how food transfers from the rural areas to urban households have increased with urban poverty while the transfer of money and goods from town to the rural areas has actually decreased in real value. Placing a monetary value on food transfers from the rural areas to urban households is difficult, not least due to seasonal variance. However, it is noteworthy that a large percentage of the rural crop cultivators use maize from their rural homes, at least going by the percentage (70%) that cultivated the crop in 2000. Given that maize is a staple dish eaten (as *ugali*) almost on a daily basis, for lunch and for dinner, we can roughly estimate that a household of four persons²⁸ spends over KSh. 500 per month, if they were to rely on purchased maize meal.²⁹ This figure compares favourably to the amount of money remitted to rural households every few months.

However, the amount of money “an average household” in Nakuru “saves” in a month by using flour from maize from home, including other food crops, may be higher than it actually catches the eye. For example, as told by one of the respondents:

“I save a lot of money when I use *unga* from home for *ugali*. The *unga* from the shops is very light and we tend to finish it must faster. *Ugali* made out of *unga* from home is heavy. You get satisfied from a small portion and as such it lasts longer.³⁰ Even if I were to purchase a *gorogoro* of maize from home and grind it, it is still much cheaper than the *unga* we buy from the shops.”³¹

Secondly, and based on the above evaluation, the economic balance appears to have moved in favour of the urban households. For example, the flow of food from Alfred’s rural home to his household in Nakuru, *i.e.* before Alice went home, increased with the household size on the one hand and a decrease of the household’s regular source of income on the other hand. As the rural-to-urban flow of food increased, there was a decrease in the urban-to-rural flow of money and goods. The flow of food resources from rural households to urban ones is therefore contrary to the common assumption that rural kin act only as recipients of goods and services originating from town.

Third, like in other households William’s wife moving to their rural home seemed to be a survival strategy, which had two benefits: (a) it made living in town less expensive, and (b) more food could be obtained from the rural home. This was largely a multi-spatial household from 1992 to 2003, whereas between 1967³² and 1992, it was an urban household with a multi-spatial livelihood. This is an indication of the complexity and dynamic nature of the urban household and by extension bringing a new dimension to the concept of a household, especially where the household members straddle between town and their rural home.

Fourth, increasing transportation costs in recent years have reduced the frequency of home visits for many people, particularly the poor and where long distances are involved. In addition, the quantities of remittances and goods (or gifts) have declined in the past decade, as

²⁸ The “average household” in this study consisted of four persons.

²⁹ If we conservatively assume that the household eats *ugali* only for dinner, four persons may use a 2kgs packet of purchased sifted maize meal for three nights and therefore they will need 10 packets in a month. The cost of a 2kgs packet of sifted maize meal is KSh. 55.

³⁰ The purchased maize meal is light because is sifted.

³¹ A *gorogoro* of maize at this respondent’s home costs KSh. 40.

³² This is the year that William married.

costs of living in the urban centres have soared. However, this does not necessarily mean “weakening” linkages. For many people who move to the city, the countryside and their native village still remain a reference point both culturally and in terms of family life. Social links are as strong as ever and in more recent times “falling back on” rural sources for a livelihood is becoming more the norm than exception.

Lastly, until recently, many development theorists and practitioners viewed rural and urban areas as two mutually exclusive entities with their own unique problems and concerns. However, rural and urban areas have complex strong linkages and interconnections which not only make them dependent on each other, but also affect their development. There is little doubt that this topic interests many, that it has potential for further study, and that rural livelihood sources can (and do) contribute to the urban poor household’s food and income security.

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