



Supplying Vegetables in the Context of Protracted Crises and Failing Interventions

A Case Study on the Supply of Vegetables to the Fast-Growing Town of Bukavu in Eastern Congo



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This article zooms looks at the access to fresh food in the conflict-ridden context of Eastern Congo, with particular attention for the supply of vegetables to Bukavu, the main city of South Kivu in Eastern Congo. It is argued that both in the current, and in a hopefully more peaceful future, better engagement with informal producers, farmer organisations, transporters and vendors is needed.

The food system context

Bukavu is the largest town of South Kivu, one the most populous Provinces in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sud-Kivu Province, situated at the border with Rwanda and Burundi in the Eastern part of the country, has been in a situation of instability and conflict for the last three decades. The majority of the population of six million inhabitants, of whom around 1.2 million live in the fast-growing town of Bukavu, is under the age of 30 years old and have suffered all their life from the situation of socio-political instability and armed conflicts that have been going on since 1994.

In addition to its mineral wealth, Eastern Congo has much arable land and good agroecological conditions that allow for high and diverse agricultural production, for its own population and beyond. The reality is, however, that the food systems in North and South Kivu are dominated by low-yielding subsistence agriculture. In a lush green environment, a large part of the population has to deal with poverty and food insecurity. More than 90 percent of the rural population live on less than one dollar per day. This poverty situation results from the combined effect of protracted crises and insecurity, difficulties to access production methods, land degradation, low production, poor infrastructures and high transport costs, bad governance and inappropriate donor interventions. For Goma and Bukavu, the main cities of North and South Kivu, the largest part of the food for the urban population is imported at the moment.

In this context, a major question is how Bukavu town residents access healthy food? Could rural-urban linkages, which are now problematic, be improved? Can urban agriculture, which is now underdeveloped, be promoted? To answer these questions, we look at the actors involved in the urban food and vegetable systems and possible options for action, with specific focus on informal actors.



Figure 1: A typical landscape in the South Kivu area.

The informal and formal actor network

The figure below shows the diversity of actors who are involved in the Bukavu vegetable sector.

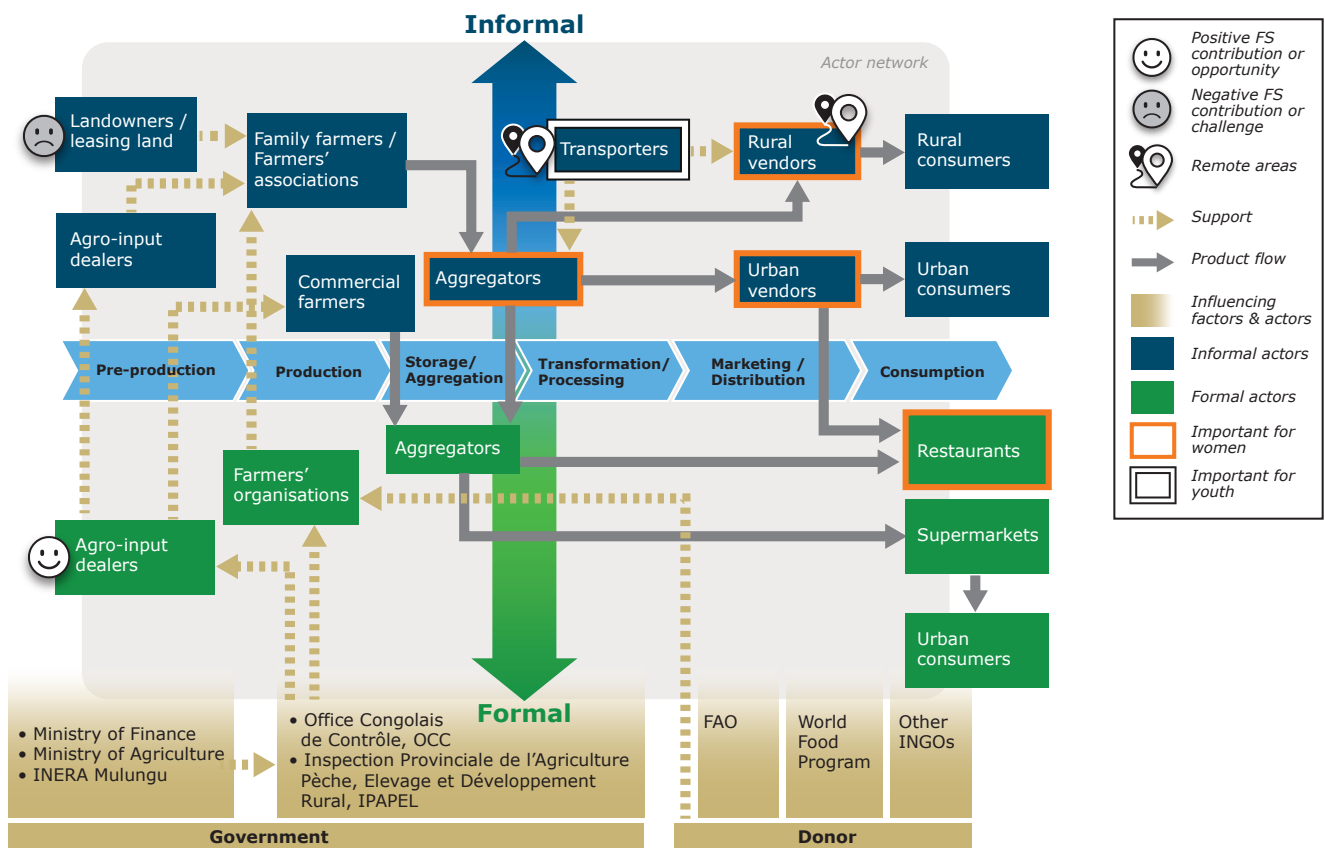


Figure 2: Actor network – Vegetables, Bukavu, South Kivu, (DR Congo).

Reflecting the general picture of the DRC agricultural sector, the vegetable value chains in South Kivu are dominated by small producers and many other mid-stream actors who bring the vegetables to the urban consumers. Regarding the number of people involved, we estimate that more than 80% of the actors are informal with limited resources. We define formal actors as those who are registered as a business, an organisation or a Government service under Congolese law.

Family farmers. Smallholder farmers who practice subsistence agriculture and who sell part of the production to buy other basic products within a distance of 0 to 500 kilometres from Bukavu city. There is a high risk of products rotting or selling at low price due to lack evacuation, transport and storage facilities. In most cases, farmers keep their own seeds, except onion, cabbage and carrot seeds, which are imported. Very few farmers have had access to training in modern agriculture and marketing.

Main food products in Bukavu include corn flour, cassava flour, beans, rice, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, egg plants, indigenous amaranths and squashes.

Commercial farmers. These are farmers who produce considerable quantities of vegetables, especially onions, carrots, leeks, cabbages, tomatoes, cassava and coffee for commercial purpose. Commercial farmers are traders or civil servants who consider farming as a second profession. Some use imported seeds and pesticides. Mineral fertilisers are rarely used for cost reasons and preconceptions about its positive and negative effects.



Figure 3: Farmer in Bujoge Village, 2024.



Figure 4: Children helping in the farm in South Kivu.

Landowners. Traditional chiefs of chiefdoms and other bosses or politicians who have inherited or purchased vast land areas. They may give family farmers user rights for a period of time (generally 6–24 months), in exchange for field work once a week, cattle or money. It is observed that rented land is not sustainably used as immediate profits take precedence over the needs for soil fertility management.

According to the Congolese constitution, land belongs to the State. Thus, the politicians in power can easily acquire land for themselves or give land to foreign investors to the detriment of local communities. In South and North Kivu, land related conflicts are recurrent in courts. They sometimes lead to murder and the creation of armed groups.

Farmer organizations. There are several formal and informal farmer organisations in South Kivu Province. For those who are formal, most are registered as non-profit associations, often with generic goals like the training of farmers or improving food and nutrition security. Others are registered as cooperative or limited liability companies. They are mostly engaged in export crops, such as coffee, tea and cinchona, and in firewood and timber business. According to Congolese law, these private and cooperative enterprises must own a trade register, a national identification and tax number. On the informal side, there are many Village Saving and Lending Associations (VSLAs), women and youth groups. Their members produce maize, onions, tomatoes, rice, cassava, beans in the villages. At the moment it is really easier to register as a company than as a non-profit farmers' association. However, considering taxes and registration fees, most VSLAs, women and youth groups prefer to remain in the informal sector.

Agro-input dealers. They sell or resell imported seeds, agricultural tools, pesticides and fertilisers. Seeds, such as for corn, beans, soya squash, amaranths, potato cuttings and cassava are locally produced by breeders registered with the provincial seed service or by the farmers themselves. Formal agro-input dealers can get an opportunity to supply their goods to international humanitarian organisations who distribute them free of charge. However, these free distributions are often too late or fail to reach the hands of real farmers.

Transporters. Farmers or resellers ensure the transport of agricultural products from the farms to the community or homes. From there, foodstuffs are transported to Bukavu in bags of 10 to 80 kg. These are often carried by women. Longer transport distances are covered with motorbikes and mini buses.

Aggregators. Informal traders buy agricultural production at field level. Aggregators are often women, they prefer onion, cabbage and corn farms. For rice producers, Bralima, a commercial brewery, subsidiary of the Heineken group, is a formal aggregator. It sometimes provides contract farming opportunities. Unfortunately, local rice production remains insufficient and seasonal.

Vendors. In South Kivu province, vegetable sellers and resellers are generally informally operating women. Many women and girls leave the villages to come and sell vegetables in Bukavu city. They walk up to 30 kilometres every day. Nowadays, there are more and more young ambulant girls selling vegetables in the streets of Bukavu. As they don't have enough money to pay the stands in public markets, they showcase their fresh products on the public highway, or in small urban and rural markets sites.



Figure 5: Vegetable sellers on the public highway in Bukavu.

Consumers. These include all who regularly buy vegetables: the urban households, one stove and seated restaurant owners, catering services for wedding parties and others. The leaves cassava, beans, potatoes, squash, and colocasias (cocoyam, taro) are also consumed as legumes. Whether it is for cabbages, tomatoes and onions, households buy small quantities for daily consumption. Poor households prefer quantity over quality. Vegetables costs are more affordable compared to fish, meats and milk. However, there is a serious challenge with packaging and storage of fresh vegetables in Bukavu. As a result, tomato paste tins are imported while local tomatoes rot away. Food safety is not controlled and the origin of vegetables is not certified, despite the presence of OCC and IPAPEL.

Supermarket. In Bukavu, there are very few supermarkets and shops to sell and buy fresh vegetables in Bukavu.

Government bodies and public services. Many Government services are supposed to support the agriculture sector:

- Provincial inspection of agriculture, fishing and livestock.
- Service National de Statistique Agricole (SNSA) – for agricultural statistics.
- Service National de Vulgarisation (SNV) – for extension services.
- Service National de Semences (SERNASEM) – for seeds.
- Service National des Fertilisants et Intrants Connexes (SENAFIC) – for agricultural inputs.
- Service Nationale d’Aquaculture (SENAQUA) – for fish farming.
- Service National de Motorisation Agricole, (SENAMA) – for agricultural transport.
- Service de Quarantaine Animale et végétale (SQAV) – for quarantaine.
- Institut National pour l’Etude et la Recherche Agronomique (INERA Mulungu) for agricultural research.
- Office Congolais de Contrôle (OCC) – for certification and quality control
- Ministry of finance and associated banking system.

Under normal conditions, all these institutions can and should contribute to improved agricultural production in the country. They all have in common that they lack the resources to do so. To some extent, these offices are considered as a burden on farmers because of the commissions they charge for their operational costs or the taxes they collect for the Government.

Donors. International humanitarian organisations that advocate for nutrition and food security in South Kivu. There are many who carry out occasional interventions in the agricultural sector around Bukavu, among others, the FAO, the World Food Program, USAID, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, etc.

Food system outcomes

Despite the enormous potential of arable land and the large domestic market, South Kivu still resorts to food imports to cover deficits, especially for rice, corn and cassava flour, meat and fish. Vegetable production is declining in rural areas following the general insecurity situation, the rural exodus, the lack of quality seeds and inputs, rudimentary agricultural production methods, the bad roads and the dilapidation of means of transport. In fact, tons of imported food products leave Bukavu for the countryside, where the food insecurity is rampant. This situation notwithstanding, farmers in neighbouring territories supply fresh vegetables to Bukavu town.

Food systems in Bukavu and the Kivu Provinces are kept afloat thanks to a large and dynamic informal sector. The informal sector employs thousands of smallholder farmers, transporters and vendors, who earn income that is just enough to survive on. It contributes to the food and nutrition security by providing small quantities of affordable vegetables at convenient locations and time. Except coffee and cinchona, few agriculture products are exported from South Kivu. This is related to the current poor competitiveness of farmers and high production costs due to insecurity and the lack of basic infrastructure.



Figure 6: Women selling vegetables in the market in Bukavu, DRC.

It is evident that without the involvement of informal actors, the unemployment rate, poverty and food insecurity would even be higher than they are today. Formalisation may improve the competitiveness of commercial farmers and farmer associations, facilitate food safety control and increase tax revenues for the Government and access to financing system. Meanwhile, the cost-benefit ratio of formalisation remains disadvantageous for smallholder farmers and farmer's associations. Banking services are expensive. The Government and the richest do not invest in the agricultural sector. Likewise, many formal farmers' organisations and cooperatives are not financially sustainable and depend on occasional external financing.

So what?

It is clear that fundamental improvement of the current situation requires fundamental change: first of all peace and stability and more equitable land access. Other fundamental issues are the access to land that is now concentrated in few hands. With these conditions in place, investment in road infrastructure would be possible and profitable to the South Kivu population. Fundamental challenges are also good governance and smarter donor support. In such a situation, South Kivu Province would definitely be able to produce enough food to feed its growing population and export many food commodities.

Practical options for action – engaging with informal actors

However, this is a dream - A faraway objective. For more than 30 years, South and North Kivu have remained in a situation of protracted crises. *Can nothing be done?* So, it sometimes seems. We do, however, think that it is possible to do more and better, even in a difficult context, if more attention is given to the resilience of the informal sector. That is the key message: Seek to align with people who are trying to make the best out of the current difficult situation.

What can be done with the informal sector?

Quality seeds:

- Community seed banks.
- Linking groups of vegetable producers and traders to vegetable seed suppliers.

Professionalisation:

- Farmer-to-farmer exchange and training (plant diversity, climate smart agriculture, vegetable agricultural practices, water harvesting for irrigation).

Urban agriculture:

- Train and equip Bukavu residents in vegetable farming / vertical farming.

Youth employment / self-employment in agriculture:

- Train and equip young people as self-employed small-scale entrepreneurs involved in vegetable production, processing and marketing.

Organisation of small entrepreneurs :

- Support informal actors in organising themselves to access land, finance, equipment, markets. Promote collective action of different informal actor groups, in addition to farmers think of transporters, female vegetable vendors and others.

Small- and medium enterprise development in agricultural sector:

- Reduce dues and taxes, and formalisation fees for small and medium-sized agribusinesses.
- Exemption from customs fees related to the importation of fertilizers, improved seeds and agricultural machinery.
- Provide flexible contract farming.

Market outlets:

- Create safe spaces suitable for vegetables selling in Bukavu to avoid girls and women roaming the streets.

Food losses:

- Promote food processing for improved conservation, promote storage facilities at vegetable marketing places.

Market information:

- Create and share a web-based platform for local agricultural products.

Government support:

- Facilitate the activities of self-employed people.

Food aid distorting local market:

- NGO investment in local production and sourcing from local producers.

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