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Water, Land and  
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RUAF FOUNDATION



# Food Security and Nutrition in City Region Food System Planning

COLOMBO (SRI LANKA)

Policy brief



## Background

In the first decade of the new millennium, Sri Lanka was the South Asian country with the fastest expansion of its urban area [Roberts, 2018]. This concerned in particular the Kandy-Colombo-Galle urbanization belt which generates more than 80 percent of national economic output, but also houses in its direct vicinity a large part of Sri Lanka's poor.

Colombo Municipal Council [CMC] is located in the center of this area, where it forms the largest Local Authority [LA] of the country and one of the oldest in South Asia, established in 1865. Together with 12 other LAs, it forms part of the Colombo district, which is one of three districts [Colombo, Gamapaha and Kalutara] of Sri Lanka's most populated Western Province, which hosts the largest part of the urbanization belt.

Despite a low average poverty rate, the Western Province shows the largest absolute number and percentage of food insecure people in the country [Figure 1]. Thus, many urban or peri-urban households with income above the poverty line remain food insecure. Possible reasons are (i) that these households pay disproportionately for essential services [e.g. rent, water, transport] which leaves less money for food, (ii) as well as a possible shift in diets away from energy yielding staples, while the wealthier capita tend towards obesity. As a result, approximately one third of the population in the Colombo district consumes less than the recommended calorie intake per day [1810 kcal]. To place this in the larger picture, Sri Lanka ranked 2017 on position 84 [category 'serious'] of the Global Hunger Index [GHI] among 119 surveyed countries. While there were significant improvements over the last 20 years in view of the proportion of its undernourished population, child stunting and mortality, the data comparing child height versus weight continue to place Sri Lanka in the same most unhealthy category as South Sudan, urging policy makers to maintain a focus on food security.

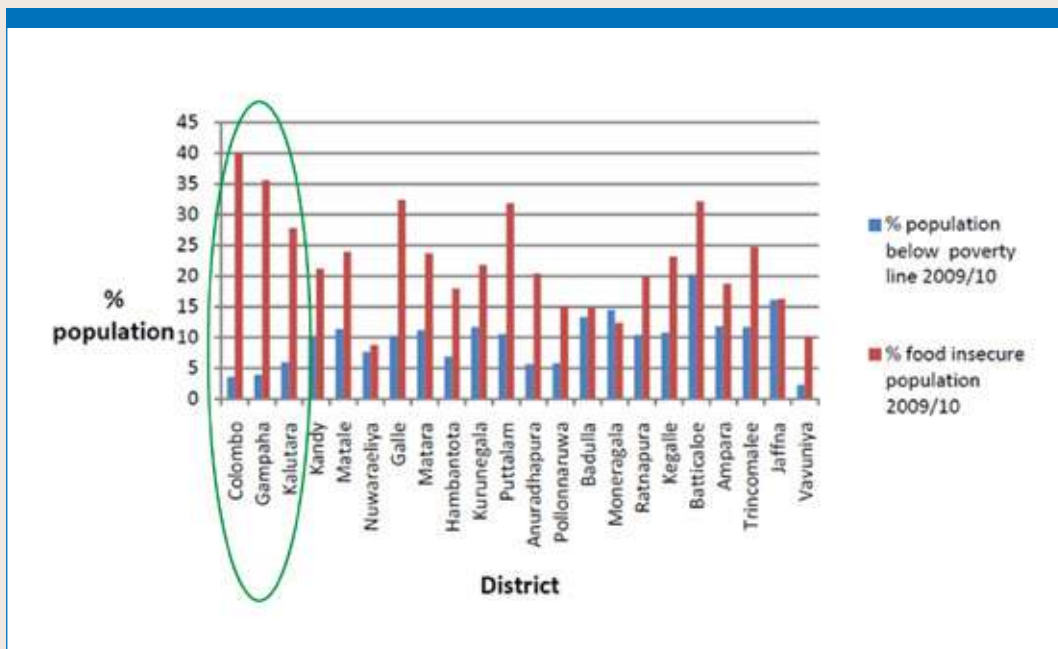


Fig 1: Overcoming poverty does not automatically imply overcoming food insecurity

Source: Mayadunne and Romeshun, 2013

It is in this regard noteworthy that CMC has no institutional authority directly in charge of urban food security and nutrition, except for issues around food safety. Given the significance of the urbanization-food security -poverty linkages within the rural-urban context, the 2015 approved Western Region **Megapolis** project offers an important opportunity to address this nexus.

## Main issues related to urban food security

The National Strategic Review of Food Security and Nutrition as well as other studies outlined common challenges across the country with implication for urban areas:

**Fragmentation:** Despite a multitude of different programs being implemented, the food security and nutrition objectives of the country, in particular in view of the **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2** (*End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture*) will be challenging. This is in part due to the fragmented nature of existing approaches and administrative boundaries (see below) resulting in limited coordination among the involved institutions. The Western Province, for example, consists of 40, in part very small, LAs, and Sri Lanka as a whole has 341 local authorities (Nov 2017). For comparison, Ireland, which

has approximately the same land area as Sri Lanka, counts 31 local authorities. This fragmentation in Sri Lanka poses administrative challenges for planning across the rural-urban trajectory to address, for example, urban resilience, migration or urban food security.

**Malnutrition:** Urban Sri Lanka shows severe signs of nutritional challenges. This includes undernutrition, resulting in one of the highest ‘wasting’ prevalence in the world, but also an increase of overweight and obese people. The predominant form of urban employment in the informal sector poses a high risk factor for many poor urban dwellers due to little or no social security benefits (e.g., maternity benefits, sick leave, insurances and pension). Thus, livelihood remain vulnerable and undernutrition not only common in the previously war-affected regions or the poverty-stricken tea estate sector, but also in urban areas.

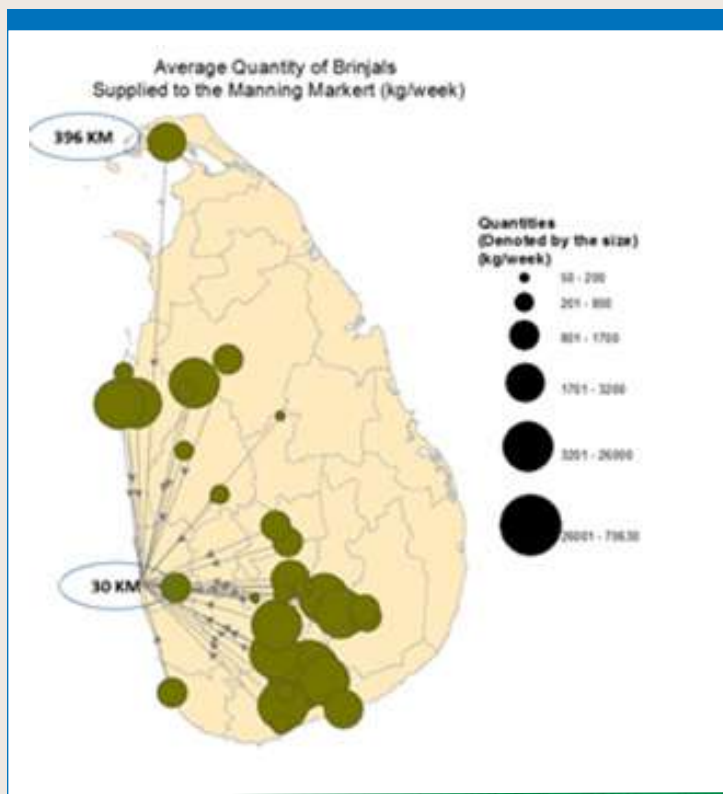


Fig 2: Colombo's Brinjal sources  
Source: IWMI

**Stagnant crop yields and increasing food prices:** Domestic food production is stagnant in recent years, raising doubts about Sri Lanka's capacity to achieve SDG 2.3 of doubling agricultural productivity and the incomes of small-scale food producers. Under increasing population and demand, the nominal prices of most food commodities are tending upwards, with short-term fluctuations/pikes due to erratic weather events, like flooding, changes of import duties etc. Food insecurity is for many urban dwellers thus more related to food affordability than availability.

**Complexity of value chains:** Food supply to the Colombo city region has become a complex exercise with the involvement of many intermediaries and intermediate processes and activities starting from food producers to final consumers. With vegetable prices doubling or tripling from farm gate to retail, especially wholesalers as well as commission agents are being accused of inflating prices to the disadvantage of farmers and poor consumers. As much as some intermediaries are required in these value chains, there is a frequent call for processes to be regulated. Several supermarkets have simplified the complexity using their own supply chains.

**Food safety:** Even though Sri Lanka has food safety regulations on food preparation, packaging, storage, labelling, or hygienic handling, the extent to which these regulations are practiced in the informal food sector, has been questioned. There are, for example, about 895 CMC registered eateries in Colombo, but also about 400 unregistered ones.

**Food miles:** Food supply to Colombo varies between commodities and does not depend on the closest production areas. Brinjal [eggplant; Figure 2], as a typical example, reaches Colombo from across the country, and is then again redistributed within the Western province. The variations in distance and transport costs are reflected in the price variations found in Colombo. While lower food miles would benefit farmers and consumers, wholesalers might prefer a larger set of sources to reduce regional climatic risks affecting their supply. The percentage of food loss is commodity specific and within the ranges reported by FAO globally.

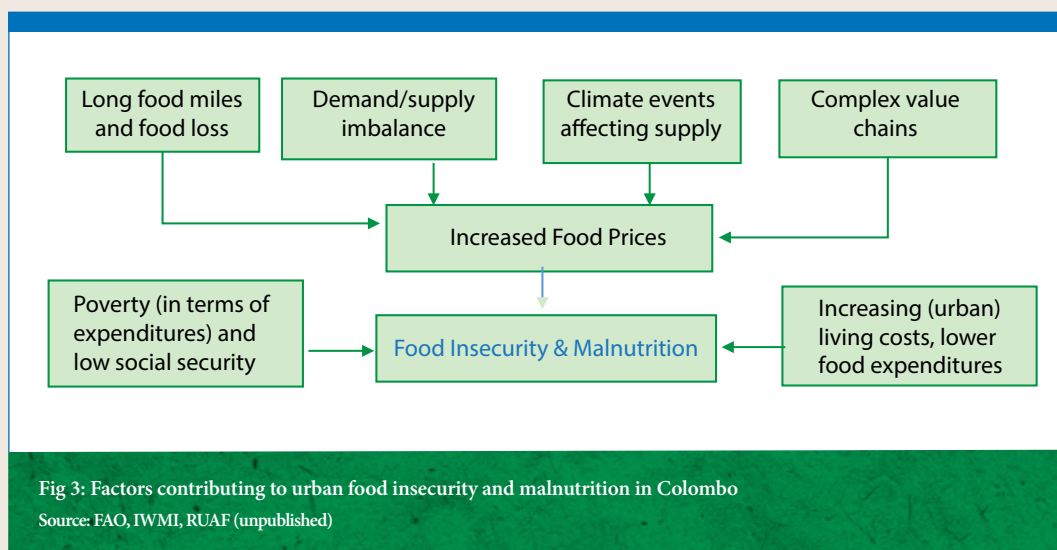


Fig 3: Factors contributing to urban food insecurity and malnutrition in Colombo

Source: FAO, IWMI, RUF (unpublished)

## Regulations and Responsibilities

Urbanization can affect all of the different dimensions of food security, like availability, accessibility, utilization, safety, and stability. Actions and strategies on ensuring food security and nutrition in Sri Lanka are in general handled through the **National Agricultural Policy** of the Ministry of Agriculture, the **National Nutrition Policy** of the Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, and several other policy documents and authorities that are directly or indirectly addressing food processes, prices, security, safety and nutrition, like in particular the **Food Act** which regulates and controls food manufacturing, safety, importation, sale, distribution, inspections etc. LAs have been granted power as food authorities to enforce the Food Act, for example, in view of safety and inspections. However, related infrastructure, like access to laboratories makes an implementation of inspections difficult.

In general, fragmentation of the institutional landscape has resulted in complexity at the national level, while local authorities have limited roles and responsibilities (Figure 4). This fragmentation is a challenge for strategies which by nature cut across sectors and administrative boundaries, such as the FAO and RUF Foundation promoted city region food systems (CRFS) concept (Box 1)

### BOX 1: FAO-RUF ADOPTED DEFINITION FOR CITY REGION FOOD SYSTEM

“The concept of city region food systems (CRFS) encompasses a complex network of actors, processes and relationships to do with food production, processing, marketing, and consumption that exist in a given geographical region that includes a more or less concentrated urban center and its surrounding peri-urban and rural hinterland; a regional landscape across which flows of people, goods and ecosystem services are managed. Thus, a CRFS approach enables to look at the complex issue with a practical lens, and to provide concrete solutions through strengthened rural urban linkages.”

MIWR	Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources Management of Sri Lanka
MDM	Ministry of Disaster Management
MA	Ministry of Agriculture
MFARD	Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development
MPI	Ministry of Plantation Industries
MHIM	Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine
MIC	Ministry of Industry and Commerce
MMDE	Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment
MOA	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, Animal Production & Health and Agrarian Services (Western Province)
MOE	Ministry of Environment (Western Province)
MPCLG	Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government
MMWD	Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development
MRA	Minister of Rural Economic Affairs
MF	Ministry of Finance
WMA	Waste Management Authority
SWMD	Solid Waste Management Department
DOH	Department of Health
VD	Veterinary Department
CMC	Colombo Municipal Council
WP	Western Province

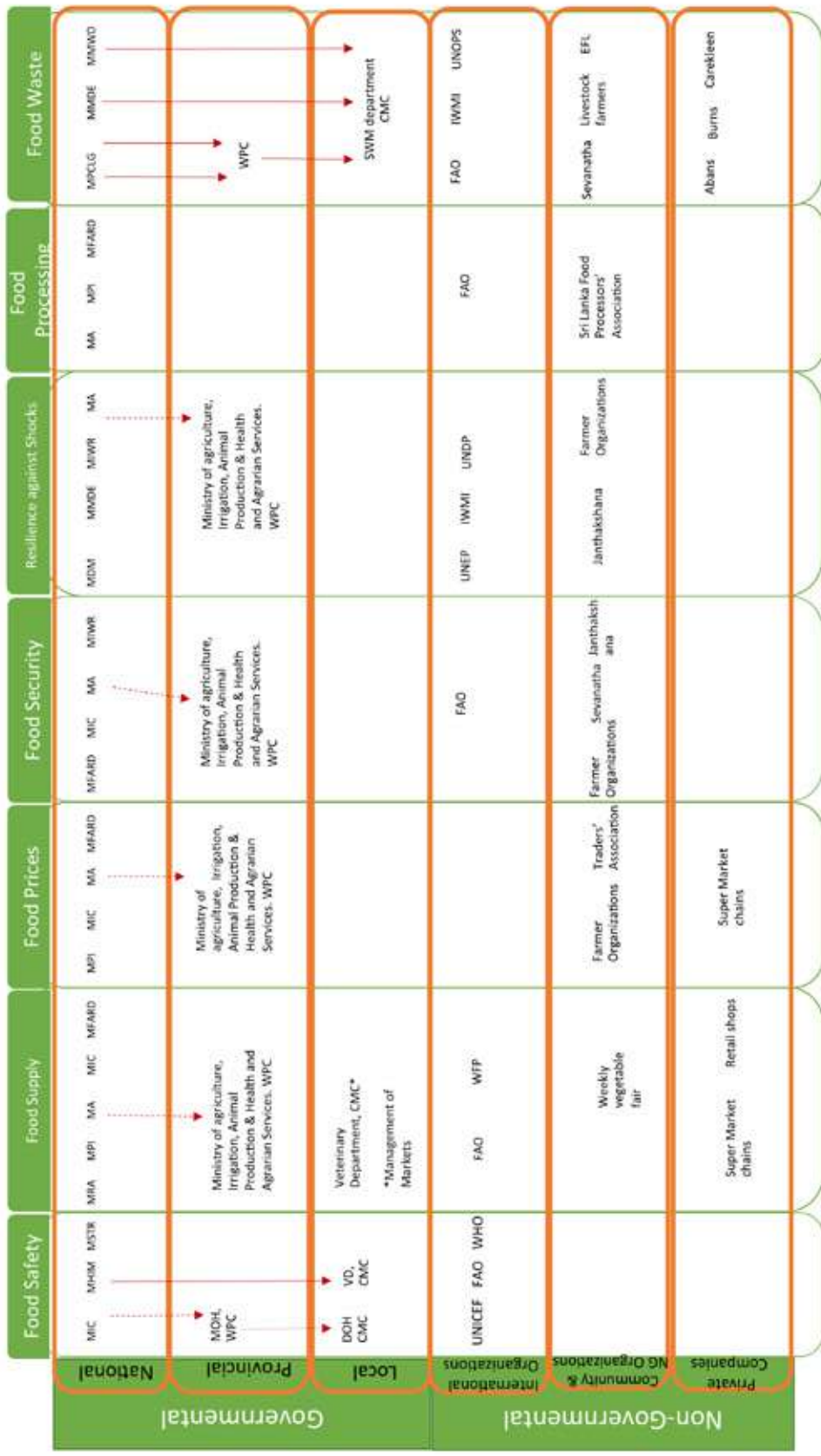


Fig 4: Regulatory and Institutional landscape around food supply, safety and security in Sri Lanka  
 Source: FAO, IWMI, RUAF (unpublished)

## Recommendations

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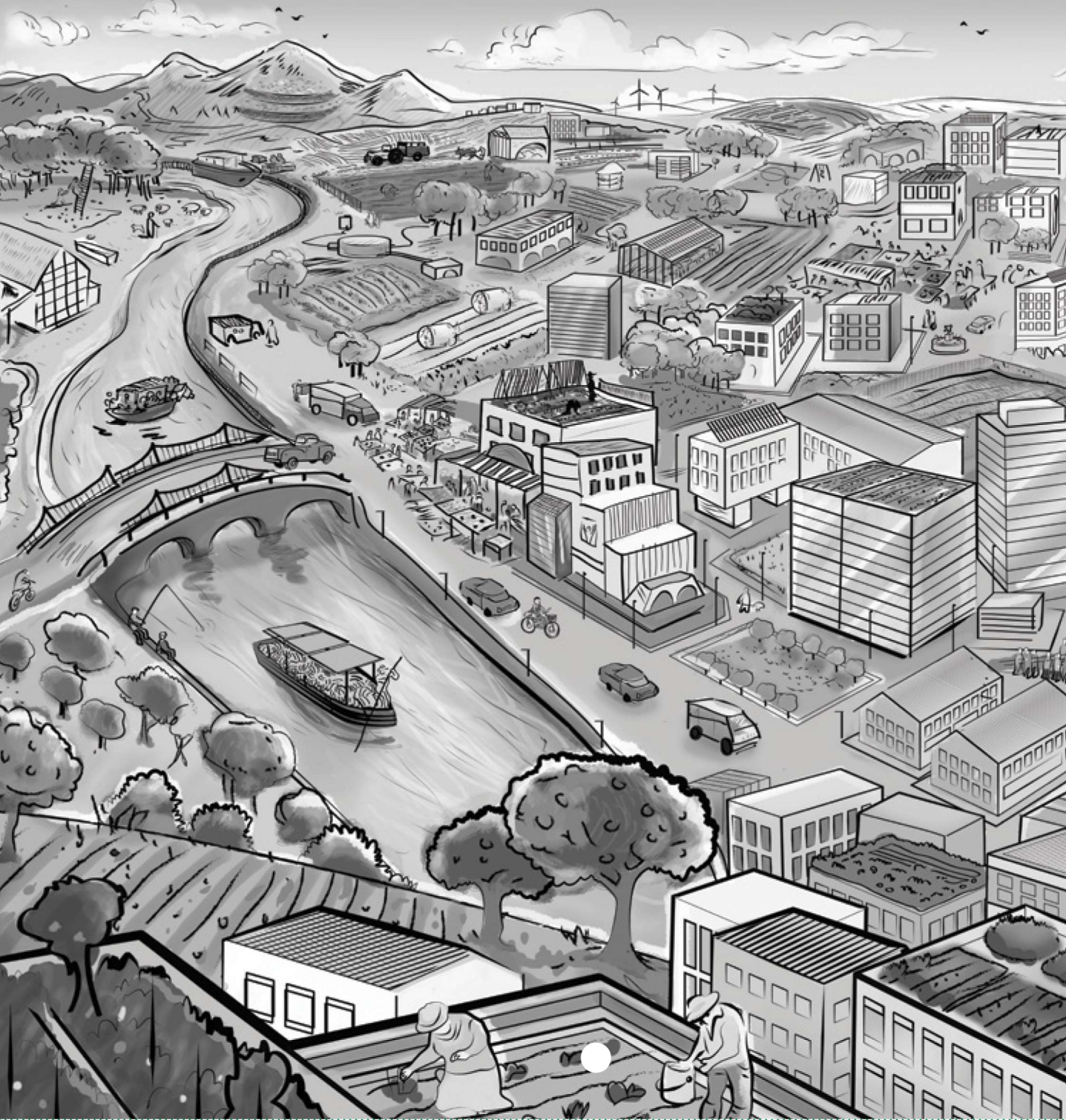
The following policy and strategy recommendations are based on stakeholder consultations and available research. They are reinforcing similar suggestions from the National Strategic Review of Food Security and Nutrition from a city-regional food system perspective:

- ❑ **Facilitate a more holistic and territorial approach to food security and nutrition**
  - **Reason:** Existing structures and policies are fragmented and not aligned to address rapid urbanization and related city-region challenges.
  - **Action:** Strengthen the Megapolis administration to facilitate pro-poor food legislations, or in general, the Provincial Councils. Align current policies with the other food security and nutrition related policies and adapt the structure e.g. of the Food Advisory Committee allowing representation from the Provincial Councils with additional responsibilities in food system and security.
  - **Outcome:** Integration of national and local food administration via regional authorities would bridge between layers of administration at a level where challenges related to urban development, migration and poverty have to be addressed holistically from a food security point of view.
- ❑ **Develop physical and institutional capacity to reduce the vulnerability of the urban poor to food price fluctuations.**
  - **Reason:** In the current situation, market chains are too long and unregulated to the disadvantage of rural producers and the urban poor. If in addition, climate related events hit the supply chains, the poor suffer double.
  - **Action:** Urban food reserves are needed to buffer shortcomings in food availability. Market supply chains have to be regulated and monitored to avoid price fluctuations, which hit the poor.
  - **Outcome:** A more reliable access to affordable food in and around urban consumption centers.
- ❑ **Strengthening food safety across the Colombo city region food system**
  - **Reason:** There is a lack of adequate human and laboratory capacity for addressing food safety issues, including additional food safety analysts for LAs.
  - **Action:** Upgrade the existing public laboratory facilities including provincial labs and regional labs as authorized analysis centers. In addition, a system introducing laboratory tests for specific foods in respective authorities can be done [e.g. coconut at coconut research institute].
  - **Outcome:** Introducing access to more laboratories in closer proximity, will allow testing samples frequently without delay by LAS. This will give LAs an opportunity to conduct safety confirmation regularly.

## References

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