

From “Informal” to “Local:” the role of data in legitimizing and supporting the local food economy in Malawi

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Lilongwe, Malawi



Outline

- Abstractions and Reality
- Mainstream framing and what it *Obscures*
- Alternative framing and what it *Reveals*
- Research: Lilongwe Food Economy



Current Mainstream Framing

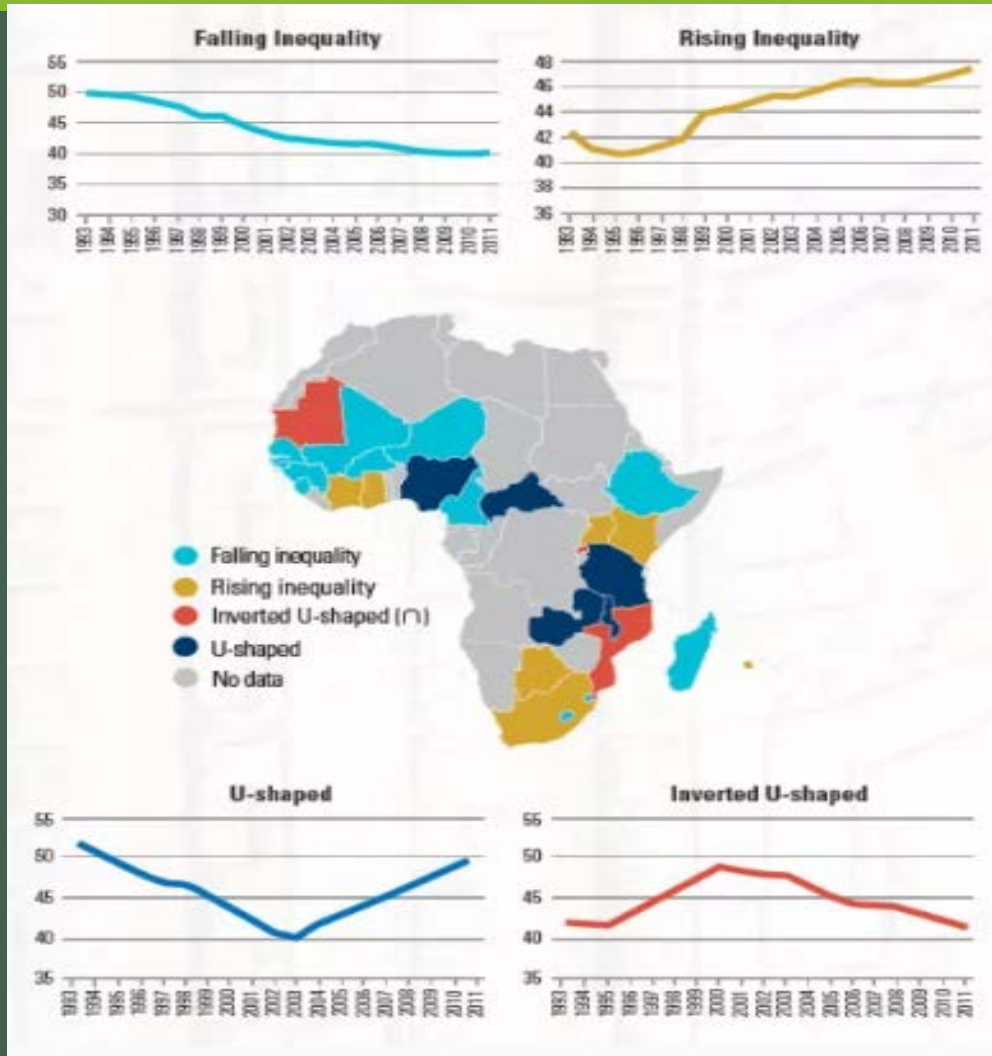
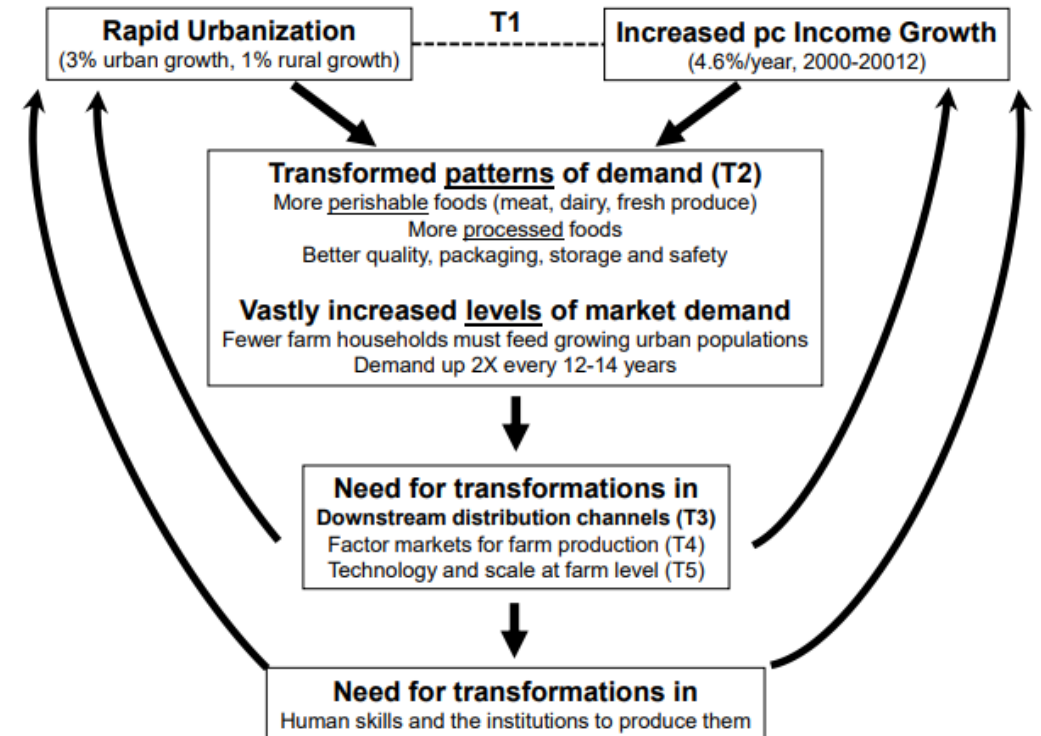


Figure 1. Transformation of developing country food systems: drivers, characteristics, and needed responses



Note: data on population and income growth are for developing Sub-Saharan Africa, World Bank. Income growth is per capita GNI in purchasing power parity terms

Tschirley, D., Haggblade, S., & Reardon, T. (2013). Africa's emerging food system transformation. *Global Center for Food Systems Innovation, Michigan State University, USA. White paper*

Obscuring Frames



Traditional
(informal)

(least 'advanced')

Spatially short
(local)

No contracts
or formal
standards

Little capital,
much labor
Fragmented



Transitional

Spatially long
Still
fragmented
Mix of labor-
intensive,
capital-
intensive



Modern
(formal)

(most 'advanced')

Spatially long,
consolidating
in various
segments
Private
standards are
emerging

Definitions are from Reardon, T., Echeverria, R., Berdegue, J., Minten, B., Liverpool-Tasie, S., Tschirley, D., & Zilberman, D. (2018). Rapid transformation of food systems in developing regions: Highlighting the role of agricultural research & innovations. *Agricultural Systems*

The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, Alfred North Whitehead

The advantage of confining attention to a definite group of abstractions, is that you confine your thoughts to clear-cut definite relations. Accordingly, if you have a logical head, you can deduce a variety of ~~conclusions respecting the relations~~ ^{relations} between these abstract entities. ~~The tradition in logic of exclusively attention to a group of abstractions, however well founded it is, is that, by the nature of the case, you have abstracted from the remainder of things. In so far as the excluded things are important in your experience, your modes of thought are not fitted to deal with them. You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction.~~

Revealing Frames

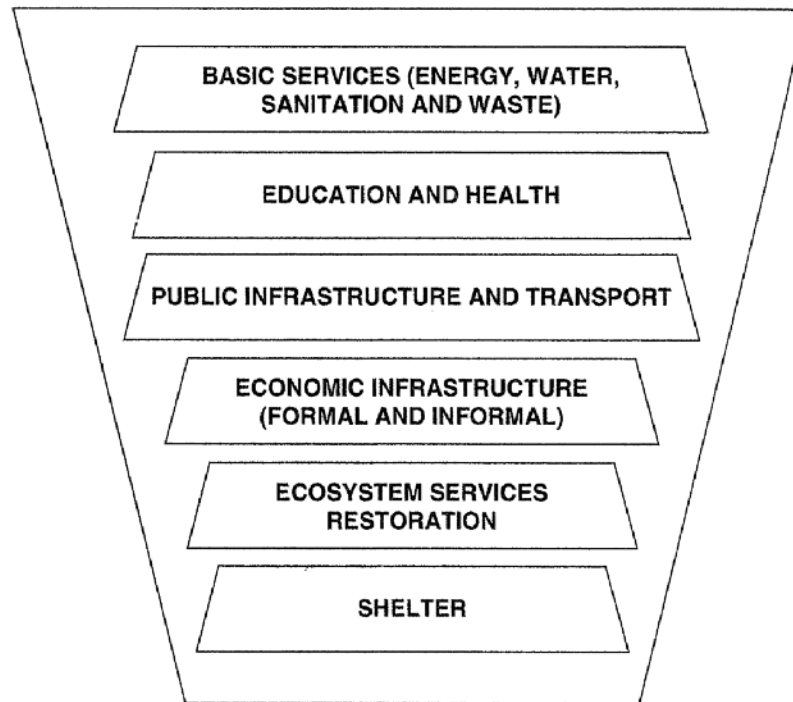


Figure 5.3 Drivers of neighborhood wellbeing
Source: UN-Habitat (2015).

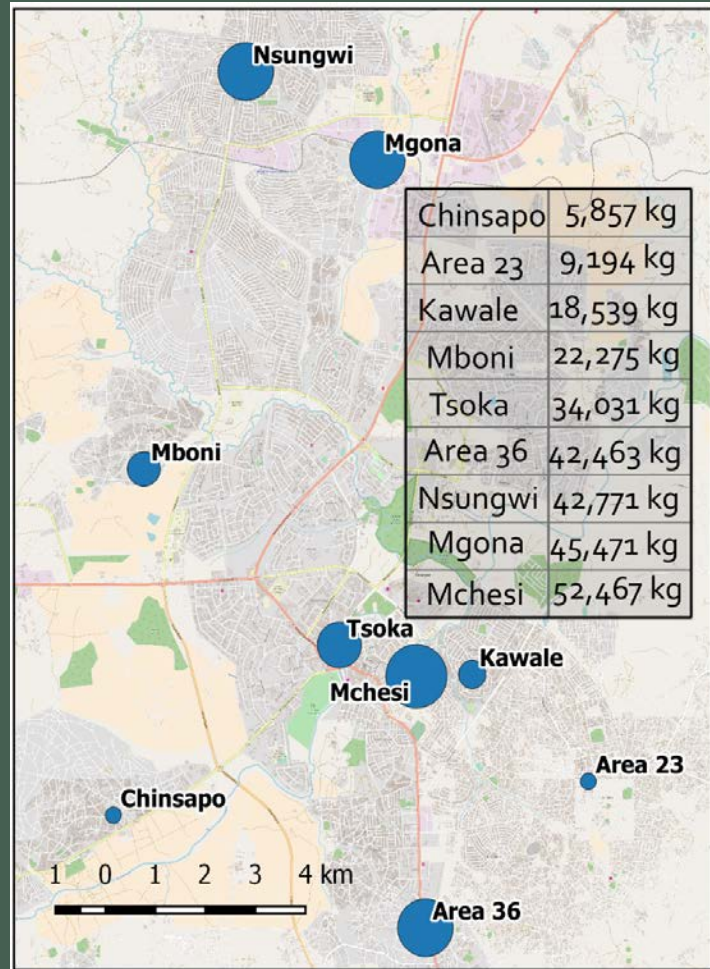
Analyzing Data Using Frames Attuned to Place



Place-making as politics:

“Start with an accurate account of how services are delivered: the configuration of the value chain; the actors enrolled and activated in these hybrid architectures; the cost structure of both supply and consumption; the nature and dynamics of the surplus value extracted... Triangulate the relationship between resources flows, institutional control and power. This kind of knowledge project implies purpose-built collaborations between knowledge intermediaries, social movements, grassroots associations and key allies in the state.”

Analyzing Data Using Frames Attuned to Place: Illustrative findings



Three-day commodity basket inflow.

Notable is the size of Area 36 which is a new 'spontaneous' market that is housed on private land. It is opposed by the municipal government, but traders say the market suits their needs because spots are available on a first-come, first-serve basis, which is in contrast to other markets and allows some added flexibility

Concluding Thoughts

- Expose theoretical weakness
- Be political
- Frame market-based ideologies as just that: Ideology
- Insist on empiricism
- Reject trickle-down, focus on material wellbeing in context of bounded planet
- Privilege and validate other forms of knowledge/other ways of being. Ontological plurality!

Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.

Feld, S., & Basso, K. H. (1996). *Senses of place*.

Biersack, A., & Greenberg, J. B. (Eds.). (2006). *Reimagining political ecology*. Duke University Press.

The End. Questions?

Zikomo. Thank you.

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