

# THE MOBILE STREET FOOD SERVICE PRACTICE IN THE URBAN ECONOMY OF KUMBA, CAMEROON

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## ABSTRACT

The mobile food service practice is one of multiple survival strategies adopted by poor urban households in Cameroon to maintain and expand the base of subsistence incomes, especially in the current surge of economic crisis. Though a fast-growing informal sector enterprise, it is still at an artisanal stage in urban Cameroon, creating an urgent need for a supportive policy environment that could have measurable positive impacts on improving the productivity, welfare and income levels of the micro-entrepreneurs. This study looks at the mobile food service practice in Kumba, Cameroon, in terms of its basic characteristics, the locational factors influencing its socio-spatial distribution, the critical success factors (CSFs) determining customer choices, and its impacts on the local environmental resources and quality of urban life. The mobile food service practice creates employment, generates income, and acts as a food energy-support instrument to the urban poor and local economic activities operating in Kumba. The vendors, who are mostly women, can make incomes that are 405 per cent of the national minimum wage and, thus, contribute financially towards the education, health and survival of their families. The paper provides some recommendations on ways to improve the efficiency of this sector so as to achieve sustainable economic and social development and to enhance empowerment thereof.

*Keywords:* informal sector economy, micro-finance schemes, women entrepreneurs, mobile food vending, central place location, Cameroon

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## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Many studies have been undertaken on urbanisation, urban activities and functions, the interaction and interdependence of activities of urban dwellers, and urban areas as market centres. Urban areas are magnets for industrial, manufacturing and resource-oriented companies (like logging and mining) or basic sector firms, whose fortunes depend largely upon non-local factors (Johnson, 1972). The basic sector produces goods for export, fetches income earned elsewhere and is seen

as the cornerstone of urban growth, expansion and development, given official recognition with recorded and measured indicators of gross domestic product (GDP). In contrast, the non-basic, local or population serving sector lacks official recognition and includes unregulated and unmeasured components (Anita & McDade, 1998). This informal sector, sometimes regarded as an undesirable “retarded” sector with low productivity and a drag on economic growth (Juma *et al.*, 1993), has also been

acknowledged as important in providing employment, services and goods (Hart, 1973; Cornia *et al.*, 1992) through economic activities that depend largely upon local selling conditions.

The mobile food service trade is an important component of the informal economy in Kumba, the largest town in South West Province, Cameroon. It is a home-based enterprise carried out in makeshift structures or stalls along the street by isolated, self-reliant individuals who meet the nutritional needs of the urban poor. Food preparation and service occur at different sites, with the home-prepared foods transported to meet clients at, often unauthorised, locations within the urban area that constitutes the spatial market. In urban Kumba, the mobile street food service system enjoys a wide spatial distribution. The concentration of mobile food sellers is highest in the central business district (CBD), and the network distance between any two food service points varies from 5 m in the CBD to 500 m in the suburban zone and 1,000 m in the peri-urban area.

This case study broadly examines the socio-spatial distribution and economic and environmental impacts of the mobile food service system in Kumba. It specifically seeks to: (i) identify the basic characteristics of the mobile food service micro-enterprise; (ii) discern the locational factors of this non-basic sector; (iii) highlight the impacts of the mobile food service system on the quality of urban life; and (iv) recommend some planning and design guidelines for improving productivity in the context of poverty alleviation and sustainable urban development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Most street food enterprises are operated by a single, usually female, vendor or a couple, with no employees, but entailing considerable unpaid family labour. In 1978, Irene Tinker, a feminist pioneer in the field of international development, founded the Equity Policy Center

(EPOC), a small think tank in Washington, D.C., addressing the specific needs and concerns of women in international development circles. This orientation is clear in her book, *Street Foods: Urban Food and Development in Developing Countries* (Tinker, 1997), the first detailed empirical study of those who make, sell and consume street foods, based on 15 years of research in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Nigeria and Senegal. Tinker shows how cultural attitudes affect what foods are sold and eaten, by whom and when. She also refers to development theory and practice in relation to the economics of street foods, including nutritional safety aspects, and the implications for research, planning and policy. The robustness of the respective country data that allow comparisons of similarities and differences among street vendors, including demographic and gender variations, like other feminist investigations, are used to frame an action agenda. Tinker's studies, showing the significant economic, cultural and nutritional benefits of street foods, have helped to change the policies and practices of municipal and national governments and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). In many of the study cities, local officials no longer harass or hit upon street food operators but provide education about food safety and vendor health.

Also pertinent in this respect is the work of the International Alliance of Street Vendors, founded in 1995 by groups of activists from 11 countries to promote and protect the rights of street vendors. Its focal point of action is the 1995 Bellagio International Declaration which sets forth a plan to create national policies and calls for action at four levels, namely, by individual traders, traders' associations, city governments and international organisations, including the United Nations, International Labour Organisation (ILO), and World Bank. A long-term objective of the Alliance is to build a case and mobilise support for an international strategy such as an ILO convention on the rights and needs of street food vendors.

Other specific writings on the street food trade include Winarno (1990), Wood (1990), Saito (1991), Bapat (1992), Mosse (1993), Downing (1995) and Solo (1998). Winarno and Allain (1991) pull together the current benefits of the street food trade to demonstrate that street food entrepreneurial activities use local resources and markets, provide vendors with satisfactory earnings and customers access to inexpensive, varied and nutritious foods. On the other hand, the problems and constraints faced include harassment by local officials; contamination from unsanitary practices; lack of credit, recognition and legal status; complex or non-existent licensing systems; ineffective and arbitrary inspections; and aggravated traffic congestion. In order to protect public interest and meet social needs, fair licensing and inspection practices combined with educational drives are considered by urban planners and social workers as some of the best long-term measures.

## **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

The demands of sustainable urban development represent a daunting challenge in sub-Saharan Africa, including Cameroon. Urbanisation, characterised by rapid population growth and widespread poverty, has led to a heavy reliance on the informal sector in most built-up areas. Urban poverty is very visible in most households in major towns and cities, which typically lack the most basic amenities for a decent standard of living (Bernstein *et al.*, 1992). The financial pressures on the urban poor result in the search for alternative livelihood strategies. Migrants and low-income urban inhabitants fend off abject poverty through a gamut of networks and social organisations, such as traditional rotating savings groups, credit unions and cooperatives. The greater geographical concentration of the less well-off makes it easier for them to organise and to protect their interests (Woodward, 1992).

When faced with a serious deterioration in their economic situation, many urban

households change their economic behaviour in order to limit the damage to their welfare. Survival strategies generally involve generating additional income or reducing household overheads at the expense of non-financial aspects of welfare, such as household time, conducive living and working environments, family unity and integrity of the local communities. Accordingly, community support mechanisms form an extremely important informal redistributive and social security system in containing the negative effects of adverse economic development on low-income households. Certainly, in many developing countries, and especially in sub-Saharan Africa, social organisations provide vital financial, material, moral, and other forms of support to members whose socio-economic conditions have been weakened by structural adjustment. The informal sector is conceivably the most dynamic aspect of the urban development process in sub-Saharan Africa.

Home food preparation and sale enterprises have implications not only for the nutritional status of urban dwellers, but also for national productivity, employment, income generation and urban environmental management concerns in Cameroon, as elsewhere. Hence, the interventions by governments aimed at regulation. For instance, in Trinidad, this informal sector is allotted a specific site in the centre of Port of Spain (Lloyd-Evans, 1993), and Singapore's "solution" to street food vending is widely admired among government planners in Asia (FAO, 1989, 1990). However, in Cameroon, the regulation of this informal sector, in terms of practice, policy and access to resources, is crucially lacking. The Kumba Urban Council (KUC), like authorities in many urban areas elsewhere in the developing world, does not have well-designed strategies that are informed by an understanding of how the urban poor really live and survive. The increasing demand for relatively inexpensive, home-meal-replacements (HMRs) adds to the strain on existing food distribution infrastructure and facilities, most of which are already inefficient, unhygienic and environ-

mentally unfriendly. Therefore, policies to develop urban food nutrition security must necessarily seek to improve market efficiency, maintain stable prices and ensure the quality of the environment. Hence, there is a great need to assist the local-level decision-making bodies by clarifying the defining characteristics of the mobile street food service practice and suggesting interventions to promote the self-reliance of poor urban communities.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

The concepts of threshold (minimum number of clients) and range (maximum distance travelled by clients) of goods and services from Christaller's (1933) central place theory can be used to define some key elements of the Kumba mobile food service system. From existing related literature, the street food trade typically exhibits small thresholds and shorter ranges. If threshold conditions are met within the appropriate range, the informal entrepreneurial activities thrive easily. This goes to Christaller's assumption on the evolution of economic landscapes being solely related to the development of tertiary activities and rational consumer behaviour. Finally, within the municipality, there exist locations at which entrepreneurs could compete by offering lower-order functions, for example, foods that are consumed more frequently and for which customers will not be willing to travel long distances. This underpins the marketing principle of spatial competition and central place location, which is reasonably reinforced in the present study.

The second theoretical framework involves competing views within economic development theory and practice on the informal sector, women's status and economic attitudes within the family and community, and urban planning standards and goals. Economic base theory provides an obvious model for the basis of the non-basic economy in urban Africa, as in other developing

countries. Assuming a division of the economy, albeit never clear-cut, into basic and non-basic sectors, this analyses urban and regional growth based on a single causal model that presupposes the basic sector as the "engine" of the local economy. In the rapidly growing cities of the developing world, the development of the basic sector encourages development of the non-basic or informal sector of, often non-enumerated, economic activities. Consequently, the informal economy depends on the practicability of registered enterprises in terms of inputs, expertise and markets.

The above theoretical insights are utilised to establish the relative significance of the various parameters involved in the mobile food practice. The geographical relevance of the investigation raises two main questions that allow conclusions reaching beyond the particular case of Kumba: What accounts for the existing food service locations? What differences in local income and wealth are attributed to the mobile food service system?

The sources of information for this study include the author's personal experience, direct observation, and qualitative and questionnaire surveys. Two different sets of questionnaires were designed and randomly administered to the mobile food vendors and their clients who formed the units of observation and analysis. Data were collected on qualitative and quantitative variables such as capital acquisition, market size, sources of inputs, food service sites, effect of distance on delivery prices, costs and revenues, daily working hours and consumer behaviour. In order to spread the sample population over a wide area of the municipality, the study urban area was divided into seven zones: Kumba Town city centre (main market area), Fiango Three Corners (Kumba railway station), Mbonge Road Quarter, Puletin/Kosala, Buea Road Quarter, Bakoko Quarter and the Hausa Quarter (Figure 1). Random sampling in each zone allowed the mobile food sellers an equal and independent chance of being selected.

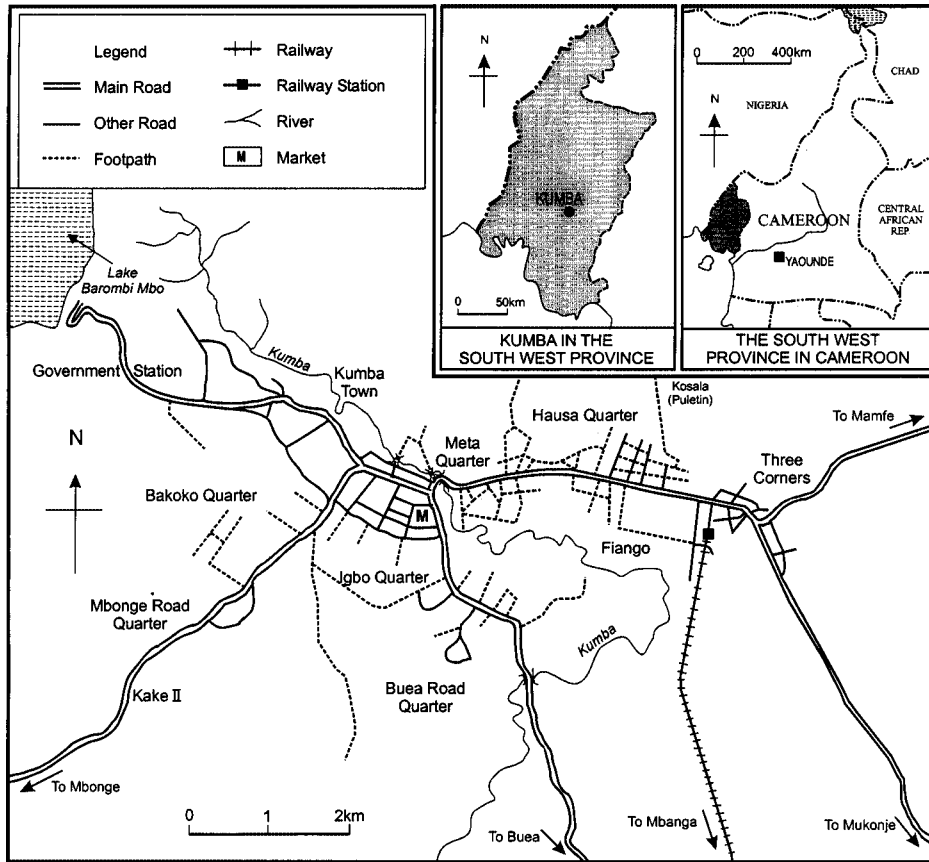


Figure 1. The Kumba urban area including the seven study zones.

The key to proper sample selection is an up-to-date population frame from which the sample can be drawn. Kumba town has an estimated 1,600 street food sellers, but only 488 (about 30 per cent) are registered with the KUC Department of Health and Sanitation (DHS) (field interview with local officials, October 2001). These legal operators constituted the actual population of interest in a pilot survey, from which a sample of 75 vendors (about 15 per cent), comprising 64 women and 11 men, was obtained. Field investigation at the stalls of the food vendors in the sample was carried out in October 1999 and April 2001 by one junior teaching staff member and two graduate students, with an entire geography graduating degree class of 40 students assisting. To understand the behavioural and other characteristics of customers, eight individuals

per food site were polled discreetly at 30-minute intervals (enough time for one questionnaire to be completed), making a total of 600 customers surveyed. Qualitative statistical techniques including tables, proportions, correlation and the Student *t* Test were used to analyse and interpret the results. Two major drawbacks affected the information gathered on the vendors: first, the reluctance of respondents to declare their real profits and operational capital size; and, second, their lack of proper records of business expenses (or investment levels), daily earnings, losses and rents. While this made it difficult to determine the tangible economic strength of the street food vendors in the sample, their continuous stay in the local trade coupled with their subscription to family welfare logically implies that they operate at a profit.

## POLICY ENVIRONMENT

As the economic nerve centre of South West Province, Kumba harbours various ambulant enterprises, of which mobile food retailing is the responsibility of the DHS. The local active business population of traders, farmers, timber exploiters, taxi drivers and public servants, who find it far more convenient to look for HMR options during break periods, makes street food retailing a vital economic activity. The urban poor and school children swell these numbers. The urban poor do not eat at home, let alone have good eating habits in terms of variety, proportions and moderation; in fact, most urban dwellers eat one large meal in the middle of the day, implying that they hardly make satisfying food choices.

In low-income countries, the regular clientele for street foods is not confined to poor households, nor are higher levels consumed (Winarno & Allain, 1991), though many low-income families would be worse off without street vendors providing nutritious, inexpensive meals. As Winarno and Allain (1991) observed, "availability and accessibility, rather than individual income or stage of national development, determine street food consumption patterns". In Kumba, even the well-off are happy to save money by eating on the street, and the demand for affordable, healthy HMRs has also increased as urban working women have less time to prepare the evening meal, most often eaten at home. Half the households supplement home meals by purchasing dishes that need elaborate or time-consuming preparation, such as *mbombo djobi* (mashed cassava/fish/spices) and *kwakoko/mbanga* soup (crushed taro/palm oil/fresh fish), or are uneconomical to prepare in small quantities, such as *ndole* (bitter leaf soup/tubers).

Overall, consumers pay attention to convenience and low prices and usually neglect aspects of hygiene or sanitation; most lack an understanding of proper food-handling practices and the potential for food-borne

diseases (Winarno & Allain, 1991). The DHS, which is responsible for ensuring the safety and contents of all commercial foods, requires itinerant food sellers to be certified healthy and free from infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, diarrhoea, typhoid and dysentery. The submissions for authorised operation in Kumba are: a duly completed application form (with a CFr100 communal stamp), a tax receipt of CFr3,500 (CFr700 = US\$1 in November 2001), a copy of the national identity card, a medical certificate and a hygienic sanction. Sanitary agents visit food sites before legitimising them. Even so, the powers that be consistently prevent the itinerant food vendors from using available open spaces in the urban district.

Though street food vending is an important urban function in developing economies, urban leaders and planning agencies tend to look upon the vendors as an encumbrance to the designed development of the city and local authorities continually embark on street-clearing exercises, destroying stalls and confiscating supplies (Tinker, 1997). Similarly, in Kumba, the urban planning process does not define the values and needs of those involved in the informal economic sector. Far from regulating the mobile food service system, the existing laws create stress, stifle productivity and prevent any innovative approaches to street food vending as a family survival strategy. Indiscriminate and routine harassment by corrupt local law enforcement agents and officials of the ministries of Housing and Town Planning, Trade and Commerce, Public Health and Tourism is widespread. There is an urgent need to change attitudes.

The fact that about 70 per cent of street food micro-entrepreneurs in Kumba operate without a health certification or a public sale license indicates the absence of an appropriate regulatory policy and facilities to improve the street food trade and minimise negative ecological side-effects. The recommendation is for the Kumba urban management

authorities to set up non-formal participatory mechanisms with representation by street food vendors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and law enforcement agents in order to expedite proper assessments of the industry as well as appropriate regulations that connect with the needs and demands of the vendors. In the face of a fast-growing street food sector, it is critical for the KUC to make the mobile food vendors a unique constituent of local plans to encourage a competitive modern urban delivery system.

### URBAN KUMBA

Kumba's central location in Cameroon has caused it to develop as a national trade centre. Besides its important central functions in spheres of administrative services and trade, the town is directly linked by road and/or rail to other economically important towns in the country like Douala, the national economic capital, Nkongsamba and Limbe (Figure 2). The basic economic structure is dynamic and the town is undergoing significant transformation. For all these reasons, Kumba is one of Cameroon's wealthiest urban centres, which together with the availability of economic and social amenities, industries and political institutions has resulted in a high population density. According to KUC estimates (Kumba Urban Council, 2000), Kumba's population had grown from 37,065 in 1976 to over 200,000 in 1998 (i.e. an increase of 540 per cent) due to in-migration from rural areas and other depressed districts of the country. With a total land area of 188.4 km<sup>2</sup>, population density is 1,062 residents per km<sup>2</sup>. The existence of some 1,600 street food vendors works out to one for every 125 inhabitants.

As a prospering conurbation, Kumba has always had a strong attraction for migrants seeking jobs generated by its urban functions and activities. Economic activities of the informal sector now predominate the urban space. For instance, the townspeople engage in a wide range of low-cost, labour-intensive activities, such as craftwork, construction,

appliance and automobile repair, basic foodstuff retailing, tailoring, hawking and driving, that sometimes require labour inputs of up to 16 hours daily. Characteristically, these involve unregulated, competitive markets with ease of entry and are family- or individually-owned small-scale operations that rely on indigenous resources, labour-intensive adoptive technology and competitive market skills largely acquired outside the formal education system (ILO, 1985; Thomas, 1992). The informal sector, without doubt, offers great opportunities for employment and poverty alleviation.

Kumba's population is ethnically diverse (Table 1), which holds potential advantages for further research on how the different household and family dynamics shape the economic strategies of the urban poor. With respect to registered vendors, the dominant Graffi ethnic group carries out about 95 per cent of the mobile food service trade, the indigenous ethnic groups (Bafaw and Bakundu) handle only two per cent, foreign vendors, especially Igbos from neighbouring Nigeria, command one per cent, and non-specific tribes two per cent (field survey, April 2001). The Graffi vendors' reputation for high business acumen and pride in their products and services are distinguishing elements of the food delivery system in Kumba. Like those in Diola, Senegal, the Graffi vendors are land poor and without a more culturally acceptable agricultural option (Posner, 1983) but to search for alternative livelihoods.

The Kumba region is also rich in agricultural resources due to fertile land and a favourable climate. More than 80 per cent of the active population of Cameroon is engaged in agriculture, the mainstay of the economy. Food self-sufficiency, the main concern of the national government, is sustained by providing farmers easy access to technical information, vital inputs and necessary means of production, as well as by supporting systematic efforts to organise the food sector into cooperatives and research on ways to

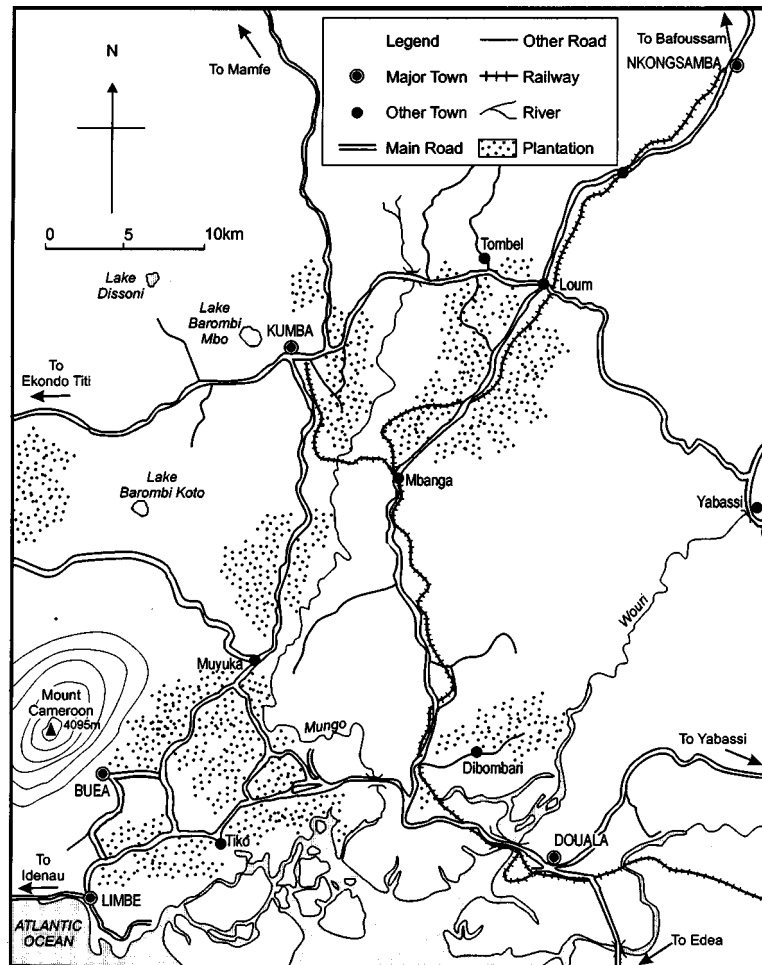


Figure 2. The Kumba region of Cameroon.

TABLE 1. KUMBA ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

ETHNIC GROUPS	ABSOLUTE POPULATION	RELATIVE POPULATION (%)
Bafaw <sup>1</sup>	30,000	15
Bakundu <sup>1</sup>	40,000	20
Graffi	90,000	45
Other tribes	30,000	15
Foreigners	10,000	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>200,000</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>1</sup>Indigenous ethnic groups.

Source: Kumba Urban Council (2000).



increase the productivity of smallholdings. Since 1992, Cameroon's agricultural policy has been geared to achieve food security through agricultural diversification and enhanced marketing and provision in both rural and urban contexts. In this respect, because women play a crucial role in the utilisation of foodstuff and guaranteeing access to cooked meals, they constitute a major force in today's urban economy as earners, customers and investors, particularly in the HMR business.

Cameroonian cuisine combines the different regional staples with vegetables, fruits, and animal and fish products into six popular national dishes, notably, *ndole*, *achu* (mashed taro/yellow soup), vegetable/*fufu*, *kwakoko/mbanga* soup and *mbombo djobi*, among other local meat/fish dishes. There is strong affinity for these typical meals which, particularly when eaten outside the home in an urban context, foster a sort of national pride and sense of identity. Street food service points have also become empowering public sites for social networking where people relax, tell stories, brag, and discuss politics, sports and business ventures. As such, street food selling and consumption have become imbued with expressions of sharing and conviviality. All the more unfortunate, then, that the municipal authorities have failed to provide the desired structure for an integrated system.

Despite the fact that the Kumba urban space has assets and potentials for socio-economic development, it is marked by infrastructural deficits and resource degradation. The urban environment is insalubrious, characterised by poor quality housing, uninhibited traffic, clogged gutters and organised crime. The city lacks an adequate safe water supply, public toilets, and drainage and waste disposal systems. The streets are not only narrow and without sidewalks, but are dusty in the dry season and muddy in the long rainy season. Such conditions raise serious questions about the site features where street foods are prepared and sold.

The following section will look at the characteristics of the street food vending practice in Kumba and its significance as a poverty reduction strategy, also highlighting the environmental pollution, depletion of forest resources and the other risks that it poses for urban ecology. Finally, some recommendations for policies and facilities to stimulate street food vending and prevent negative environmental effects are proposed.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOBILE FOOD PRACTICE**

The mobile street food service system depends on a number of factors such as resources, markets, locational competition and accessibility, which are in turn dependent on the growth and development of the basic sector of the urban area. Tertiary industries that produce goods and render services catering to the local urban society, together with allied service industries like hospitals, factories, plantations, hotels, motor parks, banks, administration, schools and markets, support the economy of agglomeration. Nationally, Kumba is one of the first order Cameroonian towns because of the concentration of high-order goods and services. The economies that derive from agglomeration are those of movement, specialisation and provision of municipal services like potable water supply, basic health nutrition and waste disposal. This situation influences the mobile food service system, which falls in the lowest rank order of industries.

The field surveys reveal that an average of 233 customers routinely patronise a food-selling point daily, though 80 per cent of the itinerant food sellers interviewed enjoyed clienteles exceeding this estimated average. Given the small-scale nature of the transaction and the modest spatial discriminatory meal pricing, 20 regular clients would provide a good business turnover. The location of a food service point is determined by two factors: the

intensity of demand for food items and the market demand for catering services. Table 2 shows prices for the same units of food, ranging between CFr50-300, with the typical cost declining sharply with distance from the city centre ( $r = -0.9148$ ) where rents are highest. This strong negative linear relationship is statistically significant at the one per cent level of significance with two degrees of freedom. Owing to the critical seller-buyer-interaction potential, the mobile food service practice tends to be localised; for instance, vendors buy fresh food supplies locally which often links their enterprises directly with contiguous farms and gardens (Winarno & Allain, 1991). Hence, the location of food service sites ultimately determines the level of success. Certainly, most competitive decision location models assume that consumers patronise the closest shop (Bateman, 1988; Serra & ReVelle, 1999).

*Capital formation:* This key factor of the mobile food micro-enterprise concerns income and material goods used in the production of further prosperity: flows of income are used to create a stock of riches, while assets are drawn on to generate income. The main sources of capital that exist in Kumba are banks, *njangis* or traditional rotating savings and credit cooperatives, customary kinship networks and informal associations of friends. Aside from the difficulties in acquiring institutional loans faced by vendors with low education levels, the local banking system, understandably, does not finance the development of informal sector enterprises since the small size of capital required does not cover the institutional procedural costs. Given the ease of borrowing from customary and informal sources and a culture of high family involvement in capital creation in the informal sector, almost 90 per cent of the initial start-up capital of the vendors surveyed is drawn from family and neighbourhood savings groups (Table 3). Clearly, then, access to micro-finance arrangements in the form of loans with low interest rates play a dominant role in lifting the urban population out of poverty and towards self-sufficiency.

*Food Supplies:* Provisions used in the home-prepared foods include plantains, cocoyams, yams, cassava, grains, beans, rice, vegetables, spices, chicken, fish, and red and game meat, usually supplied from different markets through intermediaries commonly called *buyam-sellams*. While the food supplies purchased reflect diverse cultural and economic factors, the general tendency is to minimise expenses and travel distances to and from the supply markets to reduce operational cost. Table 4 shows that the most important urban supply markets are in the CBD, Fiango/Three Corners and Mbonge Road, due to their central locations (Figure 1).

*Labour force:* This study confirms the gender-specific character of the mobile food service system in Kumba. The study sample of 85 per cent female and 15 per cent male vendors sufficiently characterises the target population of 488 registered operators. This compares with the pattern in Iloilo, Philippines, where 79 per cent of the street food establishments are operated/owned by women and 21 per cent by men (Tinker, 1997). Boys provide 30.6 per cent and girls 69.4 per cent of the labour input. Only about five per cent of the vendors surveyed depend exclusively on salaried labour. Thus, the mobile food service system in Kumba, as elsewhere in urban Cameroon, is not only family-based but the occupation of women and girls, who perceive the income from the trade as indispensable for both survival and empowerment. Girls play an especially integral role in the complex web of informal sector activities to supplement household income (Fonchingong, 1999) and therefore are often deprived of basic education. This has been correlated with other social problems such as unwanted pregnancies, early marriages, and even prostitution. Given the dominant role of women in ensuring urban food security, improved educational standards for girls would seem to be more productive in terms of economic and social benefits in the longer term.

*Transportation:* In the mobile food micro-enterprise, this involves the collection and

**TABLE 2. PRICE AND LOCATIONAL SETTING**

LOCATION OF FOOD POINTS (study zone)	STANDARD PRICE (CFr) <sup>1</sup>	DISTANCE FROM CITY CENTRE (km)
Main Market Area (CBD)	300	0
Kake II, Bakoko (Mbonge Road)	100	3
Barombi Kang (Bakoko)	50	5
Three Corners (Fiango)	250	7

<sup>1</sup>US\$1.00 = CFr700.

**TABLE 3. PROCUREMENT OF START-UP CAPITAL**

SOURCES OF CAPITAL	NO. OF VENDORS	PERCENTAGE
Family	38	50.7
<i>Njangi</i> houses <sup>1</sup>	28	37.3
Friends	6	8.0
Banks	3	4.0
TOTAL	75	100.0

<sup>1</sup>A form of customary and credit cooperatives.

**TABLE 4. URBAN FOOD SUPPLY MARKETS**

LOCAL SUPPLY MARKET (study zone)	NO. OF VENDORS	PERCENTAGE
Central Business District	25	33.3
Fiango/Three Corners	20	26.7
Mbonge	15	20.0
Barombi Kang (Bakoko)	10	13.3
Ekombe (Buea Road)	5	6.7
TOTAL	75	100.0

**TABLE 5. VENDORS' MODES OF TRANSPORT FROM SUPPLY MARKETS AND TO FOOD SERVICE POINTS**

MODES OF TRANSPORT	FROM FOOD MARKETS		TO FOOD SERVICE POINTS	
	No. of vendors	Percentage	No. of vendors	Percentage
Trek/head load	10	13.3	19	25.3
Trek/truck-push	20	26.7	41	54.7
Taxi	45	60.0	15	20.0
TOTAL	75	100.0	75	100.0

assembly of supplies from various market outlets to home preparation sites and the transporting of home-prepared foods to vending sites. The food service providers establish a basis for action to ensure that the travel distances reduce operational cost. In locating a new food facility in a spatial market, in order to optimise one or several geographical and/or economic criteria (that is, minimising transport and preparation costs – the only way to make profits), the street food vendors usually consider their knowledge of customer preferences. Generally, market inclination is restricted by factors such as proximity, price schedules, range of essential foodstuffs and social contact.

Table 5 shows that about 27 per cent of the interviewees trek and truck-push supplies from local markets as compared to 54.7 per cent using this mode to transport food to serving points. Correspondingly, 60 per cent of vendors in the sample use taxis to get from food supply markets but only 20 per cent use them to transport food to service points, the reason being that these are tied to nearby population-cluster economic activity. A gender division of labour in this everyday responsibility was observed at the food service sites. While men comprise only 15 per cent of the street food vendors, they handle 83 per cent of the transportation matrix. Women engage in the transportation activity when, as one female respondent put it: “there is no other

job that I can find. I do not know of any other way that I can pay my bills”.

*Daily working hours:* The mobile food service system operates nearly throughout the day; work starts around 4 a.m. and ends at midnight. About 43 per cent of the vendors in the sample carry out their activities in the day, 27 per cent at night, and the remaining 30 per cent operate throughout. The average daily selling period and weekly working days are 7.7 hours and 5.7 days, respectively. About 14 customers are served in an hour, with a distinct service and delivery peak and fall-off at 2 p.m., by which time the quality of any unsold food is also often defiled. As most would-be customers then gather in social groups for drinking and pastime, the vendors resort to selling beer and palm wine when the food sale items are finished. This emphasises the reality of flexible strategies for additional sources of income.

*Location of food service points:* Eating places within Kumba are located in areas that have high-density activities such as petrol stations, automobile garages, workshops, welding-, patch- and painting-units, motor parks, railway stations, marketplaces, and construction, ceremonial and recreational sites. In other words, maximum client capture is based on the gravity model (Cox, 1972; Johnson, 1972; Hornby & Jones, 1995); for a given food operator, market capture is

**TABLE 6. CUSTOMER PREFERENCE OF FOODSERVICE POINT**

SELECTION VARIABLES	NO. OF CUSTOMERS	PERCENTAGE
Good food quality/quantity	192	32.0
Proximity to residence/work place	136	22.7
Food on credit	120	20.0
Retailer's character	104	17.3
Excellent client/vendor relations	48	8.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>100.0</b>

especially assured if there are no competitors nearby. Access to a well-located point is an important asset for an itinerant street food vendor. The choice of a food service point by a potential consumer is guided by considerations of easy access, transport costs, relative distance of alternative food points and pattern of land rents also influencing the cost of a meal. Most customers surveyed declared convenient locations as ranging between 5 m and 500 m, except for those with favourite eating-places that exceeded this range.

Two or more street food traders may share the same "shop space" as a matter of mutual accommodation by rotating their operating schedules between day and night or operating permanently either during the day or at night. Seventy-six per cent of the food sites sampled are shared between two or more operators. In this case, the rental fees due to the property owner are shared out proportionately, with the first occupant of the site recouping part of the rent from the second, and so on. The monthly rents of well-serviced locations in Kumba range from CFr1,500 to CFr5,000, decreasing with distance from the CBD, which has the peak land value. Only about five per cent of the street food vendors interviewed owned property.

*Choice of food points:* Choice in any area presupposes the existence of a set of feasible options, and the food service sites may be

looked upon as a factor that shapes the contours of that set. The critical success factors (CSFs) that define consumer choices include quality and quantity of food, location, innovation, word-of-mouth promotion, service excellence and a clean physical environment. Table 6 shows that 32 per cent of the customers sampled frequent a given food service site for the quality and quantity of the food, around 23 per cent because of proximity and 20 per cent because food is offered on credit. The personal character of the food seller is also given much consideration and, finally, being treated well. Overall, customers' preferences generally depend on rational rather than emotional criteria.

## **MOBILE FOOD VENDING AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION**

Since 1987, the dire economic crisis in Cameroon has led to adverse cutbacks in government expenditure, retrenchment and redundancies, reduced real wages (i.e. rocketing prices and currency devaluation) and deteriorating national infrastructure. This has resulted in a dramatic growth of the unregulated informal sector as men, women and children eke out a meagre existence from all manner of street vending, craftwork, prostitution and even begging. Pockets of the urban poor in Kumba do not have access to health and educational facilities and suffer from

**TABLE 7. WOMEN'S REASONS FOR STREET FOOD VENDING**

REASONS	NO. OF VENDORS	PERCENTAGE
Provide children's education	27	42.2
Lack of alternative jobs <sup>1</sup>	15	23.4
Husband lost job	10	15.6
Husband died	8	12.5
Divorced	4	6.3
TOTAL	64	100.0

<sup>1</sup>All 11 male vendors in the sample gave this as the reason they got into the street food trade.

inadequate sanitation and high foodstuff prices. This socio-economic milieu is particularly harsh for women, the traditional guarantors of family survival. As incomes decline and prices soar, women and children must work for long hours inside and outside the home. Women cope with the growing work burden by foregoing recreation and reducing their hours of sleep and leisure. Some women said that they reduced the time spent with their children, which means a lowering in standards of childcare. Those who are breastfeeding face acute problems and in extreme cases have even abandoned children.

In these circumstances, in the battle to ward off poverty and unemployment by engaging in family enterprises, the mobile food service micro-enterprise creates employment, generates income and also acts as a food energy-support instrument essential to economic activity within the Kumba urban landscape. Table 7 lists reasons that the women gave for engaging in the street food trade, foremost being the desire to provide for children (about 42 per cent) and lack of alternative careers (about 23 per cent). In fact, the women also said they sell homemade food in order to pay for urban utilities (such as water, electricity and rents), and support children and aged family members. This clearly shows the heavy responsibility that women carry in the

survival priorities defining urban life. Furthermore, 80 per cent of those in the sample also derived satisfaction and empowerment from engaging in the street food trade; as one vendor said, "We feel we have strength, and that it's possible to be fulfilled, to be valued, for what we do". However, 35 per cent indicated that their stay in the business was transitory, and 20 per cent did not know for how long they might have to stick with it. Even so, over 95 per cent surveyed acknowledged that they made substantial earnings, with the result that living standards are getting better.

The typical prices for the same units of food servings, ranging from CFr50 (at peri-urban locations) to CFr300 (at prime vantage points), easily translate into average daily takings of up to CFr76,000. This means the combined daily takings of the 488 licensed street food operators in Kumba amount to an annual total equivalent to about US\$19.5 million. The daily turnover of CFr76,000 yields a real income or net daily profit margin of CFr4,000, which when multiplied by the average of 22.7 working days in a month gives a net monthly income of CFr90,800. This is about 405 per cent of the legal minimum monthly wage set at CFr22,500 and, on average, even more rewarding than the basic starting wages of skilled employees in the formal sector.

Certainly, then, the street food HMR business enables poor urban households to meet the basic needs of the family and buffers them against falls in domestic income levels, thereby averting relative poverty. The growing emphasis on global poverty eradication measures makes it imperative to consider differences in urban financial capital (i.e. savings, credit supplies and earnings) between urban haves and have-nots. For the time being, however, the issue of improved incomes and income distribution will depend, at least to some extent, on home factors, especially government policy. Poverty reduction in the urban as well as rural areas of Cameroon can only come about through fresh policy approaches targeting the needs of deprived people.

### **SANITATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS**

When metropolitan inhabitants introduce wastes into their bioregion of kinds and in amounts that they cannot neutralise or recycle, the end result is the currently high-cost problems of urban ecology. Environmental degradation is both a cause and an outcome of poverty (Rees & Smith, 1994; Williams, 1999). As the economic capital of South West Province, Kumba assumes a commercial function that encourages soaring human populations and differentials in income and consumption patterns. As the volume of organic, household and municipal wastes continues to increase and concentrate in different parts of the urban agglomeration, it constitutes a blot on the urbanscape. The provision of urban services (water, sanitation and public works) by the KUC is therefore critical to any effort to upgrade both the informal settlement and formal township areas.

Presently, urban dwellers have to step over wastes everywhere, and the generally poor hygienic condition of the city poses substantial threats to both human and ecological health. Liquid and solid wastes

contaminate the environment in different ways and by dissimilar routes. Cooked street foods are exposed to environmental pollution from dust and automobile exhaust (Dioup, 1992). In Kumba, the street food vendors use 400-800 litres of water daily for drinking, cooking and washing of utensils, fetched from wells, streams and rivers that are defiled by pollution. In addition to unsafe food-handling practices, contamination by water, flies and faeces causes diseases such as typhoid, dysentery and cholera. The local tropical climate and lack of refrigeration precludes storing most foods for later sale; as a result, common street foods, particularly cold meals like rice/beans, vegetables, fruits and crushed rhizomes, are at high risk of contamination by pathogenic bacteria. Such conditions underscore the need for affordable low-input technology to ensure proper food storage, cooking and warming. Food and organic waste materials are biodegradable, but left to decay on street corners, in marketplaces and backyards, produce foul-smelling, visually unpleasant and unhealthy environments. Prioritising environmental quality would reduce ecological stress in the urban development process of Kumba. Not only the welfare of the poor urban households but their society and the land itself hangs on the balance.

The main energy source for home cooking enterprises is firewood, and the pressure on urban woodlands is a mounting worry for the KUC. In studies elsewhere, households engaged in the street food trade consume twice as much energy as ordinary households: 25 per cent more electricity, twice the amount of fuel (i.e. all types of biomass), twice the amount of gas and four times the amount of charcoal (Tyler, 1990). The urban production of firewood certainly depletes the local tropical rainforest, thus affecting other fragile ecosystems. There is a need to safeguard the local urban forest resource by introducing new, cheap and sustainable energy sources such as greenbelts or woodlots within the Kumba urban space. Besides, the conservation of trees protects watersheds, and the follow-on urban forests

could provide local resources such as fruits, spices, vegetables, and game, which are also essentials for the mobile food service practice.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The mobile food service micro-enterprise involves very important elements of sustainable urban development, including the convenient location of service points, low-input technology, creation of alternative jobs, stores and linkages, and energy use. Mobile food vendors depend largely upon local business conditions and provide essential low-cost, nutritionally wholesome foods. Consequently, the mobile food service system is a critical consideration in economic planning and development in Kumba as well as in other developing towns in Cameroon.

On poor market days, the mobile food seller endures substantial losses due to wastage. Thus, there is an urgent need to develop ways of storing leftovers for later sale. The transportation, handling and storage of the homemade foods raise the additional problems of safety standards and contents of food sold, especially as infrastructural development in terms of water and sanitation is limited in Kumba. The KUC should design, construct and maintain the vending units and consider traditional management expertise. Moreover, it should be directly involved in improving the productivity, welfare and profit potential of entrepreneurs and their food micro-enterprises in a sustainable way. Indeed, profit margins can influence the rate of expansion and integration of modern cooking, storage and warming technologies in the mobile food service scheme. The municipal government can also impose affordable levies in order to improve its revenue base.

The inability to find a viable and more lucrative economic activity drives poor people, especially women, into the informal economy where they confront a diversity of constraints

related to access to raw materials, skills, training and information on market opportunities. In particular, women's access to financial services is often made extremely difficult by institutionalised gender inequity, despite the fact that women are highly creative entrepreneurs and adept at managing savings and ensuring that earnings go directly to meeting family needs. The municipal government should adopt a rational approach for regulating the mobile food service practice. A complementary approach giving a greater role to self-employed people in tandem with micro-credit schemes utilising group accountability instead of material collateral will be a critical factor in local development initiatives. The study reveals a pattern of 58 per cent female and 42 per cent male global family labour inputs. This is an excellent case where current municipal government efforts, bolstered by actions of local NGOs in poverty alleviation, can provide appropriate technical, financial and educational support to empower urban women.

The vendors in the sample expressed strong reluctance to state categorically if they derived any profits from the street food trade, further complicated by the itinerant, diverse and temporary nature of street food vending operations. Nevertheless, the mobile food service operators clearly deserve to have access to market information, commercial linkages, and capability-building and management knowhow to promote economic self-sufficiency. The street food practice is an important food energy-support dominating the urban environment, but, clustering around automobile repair units, markets, public places, and bus stations (Foduoup, 1998), gets in the way of traffic, generates litter on the streets, in markets and public places, clogs gutters, pollutes the atmosphere, and degrades surrounding areas. Hence, although vendors satisfy a public demand, the urban authorities commonly respond by forcibly removing them from the more attractive areas of Kumba, like the main market, government office precinct and hospitals.



Four criteria influence customers' choices of a food service point: transport costs, food prices, quality and quantity of food, and credit incentives. The mobile food service trade draws the following advantages from agglomeration: intense social contact, low transport and transaction costs, specialised retailing services, distribution networks and supply facilities. The location of a food service site is determined by proximity to social amenities, access to water and electricity, security, available space and market size. The cost of transportation governs the range of activities of the mobile food vendor.

Generally, the mobile food service practice in Kumba and other urban areas of Cameroon is still at an artisanal stage. There is a need to introduce appropriate modern preservation technologies, for example, affordable refrigeration and heating units to store and reheat leftover foods, respectively. Food loss due to low demand and/or poor quality is a recurring bane. With good safety and storage facilities, the itinerant street food vendors would be able to make appreciable incomes. The mobile food service system is part of a survival strategy that attempts to maintain and expand the bare subsistence proceeds of poor urban households in a situation of economic crisis. Therefore, the municipal policy-makers should pay specific attention to building local capacity in order to support and improve opportunities for job creation that will uplift the economic well-being of poverty-stricken families and develop street food enterprises into city food establishments.

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