

**UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Discussion Paper 4

**INSIDE MEGALOPOLIS**

**EXPLORING SOCIAL AND SPATIAL DIVERSITY OF  
PROVISIONING STRUCTURES IN MEXICO CITY**

by

**Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara and Gabriel Vera**

UNRISD Discussion Papers are preliminary documents circulated in a limited number of copies to stimulate discussion and critical comment.

June 1990

---

The **United Nations Research Institute for Social Development** is an autonomous body which conducts research on key issues of contemporary social development. Current research themes include **Crisis, Adjustment and Social Change; Environment, Sustainable Development and Social Change; Ethnic Conflict and Development; Patterns of Consumption; Food Policy and Marketing Reform; Political Violence and Social Movements; Refugees, Returnees and Local Society; Socio-economic and Political Consequences of the International Trade in Illicit Drugs and Social Participation and Changes in the Ownership of the Means of Production in East Central Europe and the Soviet Union.** Work also continues on evolving improved social and development indicators and low-cost methods of collecting social statistics.

A list of the Institute's free and priced publications can be obtained from the Reference Centre.

---

**United Nations Research Institute  
for Social Development  
Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland**

**☎ (41.22) 798.84.00/798.58.50  
Fax (41.22) 740.07.91  
Telex 41.29.62 UNO CH**

ISSN 1012-6511

---

The designations employed in UNRISD publications, which are in conformity with United Nations practice, and the presentation of material therein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNRISD concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for opinions expressed in signed articles, studies and other contributions rests solely with their authors, and publication does not constitute an endorsement by UNRISD of the opinions expressed in them.

---

## Preface

Among the many elements of socio-economic structure affected by economic crisis and concomitant adjustment efforts throughout much of the Third World today, food provisioning systems must surely be one of the most strategic. And within these provisioning systems themselves, the evolution of the institutional framework for supplying the population in Third World metropoli would seem to be of particular concern. Millions of people now live in the great cities of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and are fed through the working of complex distribution networks affected in varying degree by the crisis. It is therefore important to have as clear a picture as possible of how these distribution systems function in the context of specific metropoli.

In the following paper, the authors provide a statistical picture of the commercial structure, provisioning strategies and patterns of consumption underlying the food system of one of the world's largest urban agglomerations, México City, during the years immediately preceding the onset of economic crisis in Mexico in 1982. Disaggregating census and household survey information, as well as food price surveys, by income stratum and area of the city, they illustrate the extraordinary complexity of the urban food system and the pitfalls which are encountered when one attempts to paint too general a picture of the provisioning environment of the poor.

Analysis of this kind is of clear relevance to the current debate on how best to "target" food subsidies. Utilizing adult-equivalent units rather than per capita calculations, the authors show, for example, that certain standard income categories (such as households with income below the minimum wage) actually contain very different kinds of people, with varying access to food, across the metropolitan area. Their findings also support the conclusion that, as economic crisis deepened in the post-1982 period, "traditional" family-run food outlets did a better job of keeping the low-income population of the city supplied with food than did the modern supermarket sector. In this sense, the degree of relative modernity of the retail commercial structure has not constituted the principal determinant of success in weathering the crisis.

The research which underlies this paper is related to a number of areas of concern at UNRISD, including work carried out within the programme on adjustment-related food policy, now drawing to a close; the broader UNRISD programme on Crisis, Adjustment and Social Change, which is currently being developed; and the continuing effort of the Institute to contribute to the improvement of socio-economic statistics.

Gabriel Vera is Assistant Director of Statistical Methodology of the Economic Research Division, Banco de México. Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara is Project Leader, Food Security, UNRISD.

June 1990

Dharam Ghai  
Director

## Table of Contents

	Page
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>The Spatial Distribution of Food Commerce in the Mid-1970s</b>	3
<b>Complexity of the Retail Food Trade: The Grocery Sector</b>	11
<b>Provisioning Alternatives: Fresh Produce</b>	14
<b>Localized Structures of Supply</b>	21
<b>Variations in Terms of Access</b>	31
<b>Dietary Patterns and Expenditure on Food</b>	36
<b>Diet and Nutrition</b>	41
<b>Conclusions</b>	45
<b>Bibliography</b>	47

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Discussion Paper draws upon work carried out within the Project on the Food System of Mexico City, supported by a number of Mexican and international institutions including IDRC (International Development Research Centre) of Canada, UNDP/CIDER (Centro de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo Rural), CONACYT (Consejo Nacional para Ciencia y Tecnología), SAM (Sistema Alimentario Mexicano), El Colegio de México, the Centre for US-Mexican Studies (University of California at San Diego) and UNRISD. The authors would like to thank Blanca García de Vega and Roberto Guadarrama for their kind assistance in obtaining and processing the information presented in the following pages.

The authors are also most grateful for the valuable help of Rhonda Gibbes, Françoise Jaffré and Irene Ruiz at UNRISD, without whom the text could not have been processed; and of Victor Salvo, who designed graphs 6 through 12.

## Introduction

If several decades ago it was still possible to discuss issues of food supply throughout much of the Third World with only a passing reference to urban provisioning, that is certainly no longer the case today. The fastest growing urban areas of the world are now to be found in Asia, Latin America and Africa; and, with increasing frequency, the largest metropolitan regions are located there as well. Intricate provisioning networks tie these burgeoning urban populations to foreign and domestic suppliers and permit the distribution of foodstuffs within an expanding urban perimeter. Analysis of urban food systems therefore takes on increasing importance for planners even during the best of economic times, and assumes an urgent relevance during periods of crisis and austerity.

The problem of how to construct an adequate picture of metropolitan food systems is a serious one, particularly in countries where reliable statistics on various aspects of the food trade, and food consumption, are not readily available. Anthropological work among various groups within the food chain can clarify the outlines of the overall provisioning structure and explain the rationale of different actors within it; but at some point the question must arise of how to depict the system in statistical terms which have both spatial and social relevance.

For a conurbation like Mexico City, political and administrative elements complicate the task of statistical analysis enormously. Greater Mexico City now enjoys the distinction of being one of the largest contiguous settlements in the history of mankind. Its approximately 18 million people inhabit the entire Federal District (containing 16 administrative delegations) and 12 surrounding municipalities of the State of Mexico. Since the Federal District and the State of Mexico are distinct political entities and have different structures for the regulation of trade, there is no single source of regular information on patterns of provisioning throughout greater Mexico City. In addition, a large part of the relevant census information is presented in aggregate form for all of the Federal District and is only selectively disaggregated (for some indicators) when dealing with the State of Mexico. Not only does this make it difficult to understand the food system of Mexico City as a single integrated unit, given the need to disaggregate and reaggregate information before being able to generalize about the dynamics of food supply within the conurbated area; but the degree of usual aggregation also constitutes a serious hindrance to understanding patterns of socio-economic differentiation within the urban environment, concealed within such categories as "the Federal District" or "the State of Mexico".

During the early 1980s, an attempt was made to work with existing statistics in a way which would provide the most detailed possible picture of the commercial structure, provisioning strategies and patterns of consumption underlying the food system of the entire metropolitan area. This was done in order to complement

qualitative studies of various groups and agents within the food system of Mexico City and to illustrate, to the extent permitted by a highly problematic data base, the enormous range of provisioning environments within which residents of the capital city met or attempted to meet their food needs.

The exercise, which involved reprocessing the 1975 commercial census, the 1977 household survey and a series of continuous price surveys, so that the specific spatial components of the metropolitan area could be identified (disaggregated) and then reaggregated, was also prompted by a certain sceptical interest in testing the validity of some commonly held assumptions concerning the functioning of the market for food in the metropolis. These assumptions were, and often still are, put forward as universal truths in food policy studies of the most diverse kinds: there has been a long-standing tendency to suppose, for example, that "modernizing" food commerce provides benefits to all consumers, since modern outlets are presumed to be more efficient (and to sell at lower prices) than traditional ones. Similarly, it has been virtually a truism in food policy circles that the poor pay more than better-off urban strata for their food purchases.

Finally, "the poor" themselves have been portrayed as a virtually undifferentiated mass, characterized by standard food preferences and buying strategies, even when they are scattered throughout an urban agglomeration covering over 1,500 square kilometres, containing within it a population larger than that of most countries in the world. In principle, such a singular lack of attention to spatial context seemed suspect.

During the six years following completion of the statistical analysis just mentioned, some important new information has become available. The household survey of 1983/84 has been partially analysed and the commercial census of 1985 provides more recent data on the structure of food trade in the Federal District and the State of Mexico. A number of price surveys, in general of limited coverage, continue to be carried out; and sporadic nutritional surveys within very small sample groups have been undertaken.

Although often not strictly comparable either in their coverage

预览已结束，完整报告链接和二维码如下：

[https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5\\_21726](https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5_21726)

