

Urbanization and Diminishing Agricultural Land: Implications for Food Security

Dr. Vikash Sharma^{1,*}

^{1,*}J&K Economic Reconstruction Agency

PhD (Sociology)

Corresponding author: Address: Ward no 12, House no 105
Bishnah (J&K), PIN: 181132

Abstract

Urbanization is one of the most far-reaching structural transformations of the twenty-first century. While urban growth is often associated with economic dynamism and modernization, it simultaneously generates profound changes in agrarian systems and food provisioning structures. This paper examines the relationship between urban expansion and diminishing agricultural land from a sociological perspective, arguing that farmland conversion constitutes a structural threat to food security. Moving beyond technical and environmental explanations, the analysis situates land within relations of power, class, gender, and social reproduction. Drawing on agrarian political economy, the production of space, and food regimes theory, the paper demonstrates how urban expansion reshapes agrarian relations, redistributes risk, and intensifies inequalities in food access.

Using evidence from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), UN-Habitat, the World Bank, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the study identifies key social pathways linking land loss to food insecurity: erosion of entitlements, livelihood displacement, heightened market dependence, weakening of community safety nets, and gendered dispossession. Particular attention is given to peri-urban zones, where agricultural and urban systems intersect and where transformations are most pronounced.

The paper concludes that food insecurity associated with diminishing agricultural land is not an inevitable consequence of urbanization but a socially produced outcome shaped by governance failures, land commodification, and exclusionary planning paradigms. Addressing this challenge requires grounded policy interventions that integrate food systems into urban planning, secure land tenure, and democratize land governance.

Keywords: *Food security, Urbanization, Agriculture, Land, Urban planning*

I. Introduction

Urbanization has historically been interpreted as a hallmark of development. From classical sociology to contemporary policy frameworks, the growth of cities has been associated with industrialization, social mobility, and economic transformation. Yet, as urban populations expand, cities increasingly absorb surrounding rural landscapes. According to the United Nations (2019), the world's urban population is projected to reach nearly 68 percent by 2050. This demographic transformation is accompanied by spatial expansion, often into fertile agricultural land located at urban peripheries.

The conversion of agricultural land into urban infrastructure, residential complexes, industrial estates, and transport corridors represents a structural transformation of the rural–urban interface. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023) emphasizes that urbanization is reshaping agrifood systems across the rural–urban continuum, affecting production patterns, supply chains, dietary diversity, and affordability of nutritious food. Despite its importance, the loss of agricultural land is frequently treated as a technical land-use issue rather than as a social process embedded in power relations.

Food security is multidimensional, encompassing availability, access, utilization, and stability. Sociologically, food security is not merely about aggregate food supply but about entitlements, social distribution, and access mediated by class, gender, and institutional arrangements. Agricultural land supports food security not only through market production but also through subsistence cultivation, reciprocal exchange, and community-level resilience. When such land is lost, food insecurity can emerge even in contexts of apparent economic growth.

This paper argues that urban expansion and diminishing agricultural land must be analysed through sociological theory to understand their implications for food security. By integrating agrarian political economy, spatial theory, and entitlement analysis, the study conceptualizes land conversion as a socially structured transformation with uneven consequences.

II. Theoretical Foundations: Agrarian Political Economy, Space, and Food

Understanding the sociological implications of land loss requires grounding in classical and contemporary theory. Marx’s analysis of land as a factor within relations of production provides an initial lens. Land under capitalism becomes commodified, subject to exchange value rather than solely use value. As urban economies expand, land near cities acquires speculative potential, often far exceeding its agricultural value. This shift reflects the broader logic of capitalist accumulation.

David Harvey’s concept of “accumulation by dispossession” extends Marx’s insights to contemporary urbanization. Urban expansion frequently involves the transfer of land from smallholders to developers or state-backed projects through processes that may be legal yet socially unequal (Harvey, 2003). Dispossession undermines agrarian livelihoods and shifts control over productive resources.

Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space further illuminates how urban planning constructs agricultural land as marginal or temporary. Urban space is socially produced to reflect dominant economic priorities. Agriculture, often perceived as rural and backward within modernization narratives, is rendered incompatible with visions of urban modernity (Lefebvre, 1991). This symbolic marginalization legitimizes its physical erasure.

Food regimes theory situates these dynamics within global political economy. McMichael (2013) argues that contemporary food systems are organized through market-oriented regimes that prioritize integration into global supply chains. Urban expansion accelerates this integration by weakening localized production systems and increasing dependence on distant food sources.

Finally, Amartya Sen's entitlement approach shifts attention from production to access (Sen, 1981). Food insecurity arises when people lack entitlements to obtain food, regardless of aggregate supply. Agricultural land constitutes a direct entitlement—providing food, income, and bargaining power. Its loss undermines entitlement structures and increases vulnerability. Together, these theoretical perspectives frame urban expansion as a process that restructures land relations, labor markets, and food entitlements in socially differentiated ways.

III. Urban Expansion and Agrarian Transformation: A Social Analysis

Urban expansion must be understood not merely as demographic concentration or spatial enlargement, but as a structural transformation of agrarian relations. The outward growth of cities into peri-urban and rural landscapes reconfigures ownership patterns, labor regimes, production systems, and social reproduction. From a sociological standpoint, this transformation is neither accidental nor purely technical; it is embedded in political economy, market rationalities, and the production of space.

Globally, urban areas are expanding faster than urban populations themselves, leading to increased land consumption per capita (United Nations, 2019). This spatial growth often occurs through the conversion of fertile agricultural land surrounding cities. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2023) documents that urbanization is significantly reshaping agrifood systems across the rural–urban continuum, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where peri-urban agriculture has historically supplied cities with fresh produce. The loss of such land diminishes proximity between production and consumption, restructuring food flows and weakening local supply systems.

From a political economy perspective, this conversion reflects the differential valuation of land under capitalism. Agricultural land near cities acquires speculative value as potential real estate, often far exceeding its value as a site of food production. David Harvey's analysis of accumulation by dispossession provides a critical framework for understanding this shift. Urban expansion frequently entails the transfer of land from smallholders or customary users to developers and state-backed projects, often through mechanisms framed as modernization, infrastructure development, or public purpose. In practice, such processes may involve unequal bargaining power, limited participation, and inadequate compensation, leading to agrarian dispossession.

This dispossession is not simply economic but social. Land in agrarian societies is a basis of identity, kinship networks, and intergenerational continuity. Its conversion disrupts these embedded social relations. When agricultural land is fragmented or sold, farming households frequently transition to wage labor in urban economies. However, as UN-Habitat (2020) notes, urban labor markets in rapidly growing cities often fail to absorb displaced populations into stable employment. Instead, many former cultivators enter informal sectors characterized by precarity, low wages, and absence of social protection. This transition alters the material basis of food security: households shift from self-provisioning and mixed subsistence-market strategies to full market dependence.

Empirical evidence supports the link between peri-urban agriculture and food security outcomes. **Petrikova et al. (2024)**, examining peri-urban farming households, find that engagement in small-scale agriculture correlates positively with dietary diversity and improved nutrition indicators. Households with access to cultivation spaces are better able to consume vegetables, fruits, and other micronutrient-rich foods. When land is lost, dietary diversity declines and reliance on purchased staples increases. This shift has important implications for both caloric sufficiency and nutritional quality.

Urban expansion also reshapes cropping systems and agrobiodiversity. Zimmerer (2021) argues that urban pressures frequently incentivize specialization in high-value crops or the abandonment of diversified farming systems. As land becomes scarce and fragmented, farmers may prioritize marketable monocultures or cease production altogether. This trend reduces crop diversity that traditionally buffered households against shocks and supported dietary variety. The decline of agrobiodiversity is therefore not merely ecological but social, affecting cultural food practices and nutritional resilience.

The IPCC (2019) situates land-use change within broader environmental pressures, noting that urban expansion often pushes agriculture into marginal or environmentally vulnerable areas. As prime land near cities is converted, production may shift to less fertile zones requiring higher inputs or facing greater climate risks. This relocation increases the vulnerability of food systems to environmental stress. Sociologically, this represents a redistribution of risk: marginalized farmers bear greater exposure while urban development captures the benefits of prime land conversion.

Urban expansion further transforms agrarian class structures. In peri-urban zones, landowners with formal titles may benefit financially from land sales, while tenants, sharecroppers, and landless laborers lose livelihoods without compensation. McMichael's (2013) food regimes framework helps contextualize these transformations within global market integration. As local food systems weaken, cities become increasingly dependent on national and international supply chains governed by corporate actors. This integration may enhance aggregate availability but also intensifies market volatility and reduces local autonomy.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space deepens the analysis by highlighting how urban planning constructs agriculture as incompatible with urban modernity. Planning discourses frequently treat farmland as "vacant" or "underutilized," legitimizing its conversion. Agricultural spaces are reimagined as future residential colonies, industrial parks, or transport corridors. In this process, the social value of food production is subordinated to exchange value. The symbolic and material marginalization of agriculture within urban imaginaries accelerates its disappearance.

Gender dynamics are integral to this transformation. Women often play central roles in peri-urban agriculture, managing kitchen gardens, small livestock, and household nutrition. Yet women's land rights are frequently informal or secondary. FAO (2023) underscores that secure access to land for women is strongly associated with improved household food security and child nutrition. When agricultural land is converted, women may lose not only productive space but also decision-making authority within households and communities. Compensation

mechanisms often prioritize formally titled (typically male) landowners, reinforcing gender inequalities.

The transformation of agrarian systems under urban expansion therefore operates through interlocking mechanisms: commodification of land, restructuring of labor, erosion of agrobiodiversity, gendered dispossession, and integration into volatile markets. Each of these processes mediates the relationship between land loss and food security. Importantly, the outcomes are uneven. Some households may experience short-term financial gains from land sales; others face long-term insecurity as land-based safety nets disappear.

Urban expansion does not inevitably destroy agrarian systems. In certain contexts, proximity to cities can create market opportunities for high-value horticulture and dairy production. However, such adaptive strategies require secure tenure, supportive policies, and access to infrastructure. Without these conditions, the dominant pattern is one of declining agricultural land, weakening local food systems, and increasing vulnerability among marginalized populations.

Thus, urban expansion must be conceptualized as a socially structured process of agrarian transformation. It is driven by political economy forces, legitimized by planning paradigms, and experienced unevenly across class and gender lines. Its implications for food security are profound because it alters the foundational relationship between land and social reproduction. The diminishing of agricultural land near cities represents not simply spatial change but a reorganization of the social basis of food provisioning itself.

IV. Linking Land Loss and Food Insecurity

The causal relationship between diminishing agricultural land and food insecurity operates through multiple, interlocking social pathways that reshape how households and communities secure food. These pathways are social in nature: they concern entitlement and access, labor and livelihoods, market exposure and volatility, and the erosion of communal safety nets that historically buffered people against shocks. To grasp how land conversion translates into food deprivation, it is necessary to move beyond simplistic production-loss calculations and trace the social mechanisms by which space, power, and social reproduction interconnect.

The first pathway centers on entitlements and access. Drawing on Amartya Sen's foundational entitlement framework, food security is not simply the outcome of aggregate food availability but of individuals' and households' entitlements—legal, social, and economic—to obtain food (Sen, 1981). Agricultural land constitutes a primary entitlement for many rural and peri-urban households: it confers the capacity for direct production, collateral for credit, and a locus for reciprocal exchange. When land is appropriated for urban development or when its productive potential is fragmented, households lose a critical asset that underpins their entitlement to food. Even where markets supply food in aggregate, the displacement of land-based entitlements removes non-monetary pathways to food access—garden produce, shared harvests, and barter—that many low-income households rely upon. In this sense, the social outcome of land loss is not merely reduced tons of output but the collapse of a multi-modal system of entitlement that sustained consumption rights for vulnerable groups.

Closely linked to entitlements is the second pathway: livelihood transformation and labor market incorporation. The conversion of farmland commonly forces affected households into new occupational trajectories. While urban proximity may generate non-farm employment opportunities, the reality of labor absorption is often fraught. Rapid and unplanned urbanization tends to expand informal labor markets characterized by low wages, irregular employment, and minimal social protection (UN-Habitat, 2020). Former cultivators who migrate to or remain on the urban fringe frequently enter precarious work in construction, domestic services, petty trade, or casual day labor. Such employment rarely replicates the multi-functional security that land provided—subsistence crops, fodder for livestock, and household savings in kind. As wage dependence increases, households become more sensitive to labor market shocks and seasonal unemployment, both of which undermine stable access to adequate nutrition. Moreover, the feminization of precarious urban work—where women disproportionately take up part-time, informal, or care-related labor—can alter intra-household resource allocation and diminish dietary outcomes for children and other dependents.

The third pathway concerns market dependence and price exposure. The displacement of local production feeds directly into heightened reliance on commodified food systems. Where households once supplemented diets from their own plots, they now must purchase most or all food. This transformation exposes them to price volatility, transport cost increases, and supply chain disruptions. Global and national shocks—ranging from commodity price spikes to fuel price rises or climate-induced crop failures in distant production zones—can rapidly erode purchasing power. **The World Bank (2022)** has emphasized how such shocks disproportionately harm urban poor populations who lack land-based buffers. The sociological implication is that market integration, in the absence of robust social protection, transforms spatial dispossession into acute household vulnerability.

A fourth pathway is the weakening of social and community safety nets. Agricultural landscapes are not only production zones but social commons in which kinship, reciprocal labor exchanges, and informal credit systems operate. Shared access to grazing land, communal water points, neighbourhood gardens, and seasonal sharing of harvest surpluses form part of an invisible infrastructure of resilience. The fragmentation and privatization of land—especially when undertaken through speculative sale or top-down planning—dissolve these communal institutions. Without collective coping mechanisms, households lose informal avenues for risk sharing, reducing communal ability to manage food shortfalls. Sociological studies of social capital (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2002; Putnam, 2000) show that diminished community cohesion and trust exacerbate vulnerability, as households cannot rely on reciprocal arrangements that previously softened the impact of shocks.

Intersecting these mechanisms are pronounced gendered and tenure-based inequities. Women are often primary managers of household nutrition and small-scale food production—kitchen gardens, poultry, and seed saving—that are particularly vulnerable to land conversion. Agarwal's influential work demonstrates that women's land security is central to household food outcomes (Agarwal, 1994). However, women frequently hold insecure, customary, or de facto access to land that is not legally recognized. When peri-urban land changes hands, formal

titling processes and compensation schemes commonly privilege legally titled (often male) owners, excluding women and creating a gendered deficit in food provisioning capacity. Tenure insecurity also stratifies outcomes by class and caste: tenants, sharecroppers, and landless laborers typically receive little or no compensation for lost access to land and suffer greater long-term food insecurity as a result.

Another social pathway arises from transformations in agrobiodiversity and cropping practices. The pressures of urban land markets and proximity to city consumers can induce shifts toward high-value, market-oriented monocultures or encourage abandonment of cultivation altogether. The loss of diverse cropping systems decreases households' dietary options and erodes ecological resilience. Agrobiodiversity historically provided both nutritional variety and ecological insurance against pests, pests, and climatic variability; its reduction converts spatial loss into nutritional risk. As Karl Zimmerer (2021) and others have argued, the social costs of diminished agrobiodiversity include not only reduced dietary diversity but also the weakening of local knowledge systems and seed networks that sustained food cultures.

Finally, the political-institutional pathway must be recognized. The governance environment—planning regimes, property law, participation mechanisms, and the capacity for social protection—mediates whether land conversion produces catastrophic or manageable food outcomes. Where governance is inclusive, tenure is secure, and compensatory measures are equitable, peri-urban change can be negotiated with mitigated harm. Conversely, weak participation, corruption, or technocratic planning that marginalizes producers converts land conversion into a route for accumulation by dispossession, deepening food insecurity among those least able to absorb it. Empirical syntheses from international agencies emphasize that policy design, not merely market forces, determines whether urbanization will exacerbate or alleviate food insecurity (FAO, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2020).

Taken together, these social pathways show that the food security impacts of shrinking agricultural land are produced through a web of social relations and institutional arrangements. The pathways are mutually reinforcing: loss of entitlements accelerates labor precarity; labor precarity increases market dependence; market dependence makes households susceptible to price and supply shocks; and weakened communal structures reduce the capacity for collective coping. Understanding these systemic interactions is crucial for policy responses that aim to protect food security in rapidly urbanizing contexts. Effective interventions must therefore address not only land preservation but also tenure reform, gender equity, social protection, market regulation, and participatory governance to rebuild the social entitlements and communal infrastructures that sustain food security.

V. Urban Demand, Consumption Patterns, and Nutritional Implications

Urbanization alters not only where food is produced but what is consumed. Urban diets often shift toward processed, convenience, and energy-dense foods as time-poverty, wage labor, and commercial food environments reshape consumption. This nutrition transition can coexist paradoxically with food insecurity: households may secure caloric sufficiency while lacking dietary diversity and micronutrients, leading to hidden hunger and increases in non-communicable diseases.

Moreover, as peri-urban agricultural land decreases, the supply of affordable, nutrient-rich fresh produce may decline in proximity to poor urban neighbourhoods. When fresh vegetables become less accessible or more expensive, households substitute cheaper, calorie-dense foods, exacerbating nutritional deficits. These changes disproportionately affect children, pregnant women, and the elderly, with long-term consequences for public health and human capital.

VI. Governance Failures and Planning Blindspots

A recurring theme in the sociological literature is governance — how decisions about land use are made, whose voices count, and what institutional frameworks mediate conflict. Urban planning often treats agricultural land as a residue to be sacrificed for urban growth, reflecting a planning paradigm that privileges economic modernization over social reproduction. Where institutional arrangements fail to integrate food system concerns into urban development (zoning, land banking, infrastructure siting), agricultural lands are fragmented and rendered nonviable.

Informality compounds governance challenges. Informal settlements and informal land transactions escape formal planning mechanisms, hindering efforts to secure tenure or design inclusive urban expansions. In many contexts, weak local governance, corruption, and lack of meaningful participation by affected communities result in outcomes skewed toward developers and politically connected actors. Addressing agricultural land loss thus requires not only technical land-use planning but democratized governance that centers producers and residents in decision-making.

VII. Pathways to Resilience: Policy Recommendations

To address the threat that urbanization and diminishing agricultural land pose to food security, policy responses should center social justice, democratic governance, and multi-scalar integration of urban and rural planning. Below are policy directions grounded in sociological insights.

1. Secure and Equitable Tenure

Legal recognition of smallholders' and women's land rights is foundational. Tenure security reduces the risk of involuntary dispossession and strengthens bargaining power in negotiations over land sales or development. Policies should prioritize formalizing customary and informal claims where appropriate, combined with safeguards against forced evictions and fair, participatory compensation mechanisms.

2. Integrative Urban–Rural Planning

Urban planning must explicitly incorporate food system objectives. Zoning rules can protect high-value peri-urban agricultural lands and designate urban growth boundaries. Integrative planning should connect transport, markets, and cold chains with local food production, ensuring that peri-urban agriculture remains viable and connected to demand.

3. Support for Peri-Urban Producers

Subsidies, extension services, credit access, and market linkages tailored to smallholders and peri-urban producers can sustain production. Support should emphasize diversified and nutritious crop production rather than mono-industrial models. Social protection programs (cash transfers, food vouchers) should be gender-sensitive and complementary to livelihood support.

4. Promotion of Local Food Networks and Urban Agriculture

Strengthening short food supply chains — farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and urban gardening — can mitigate dependence on long supply chains and enhance access to fresh produce for urban populations. Urban agriculture initiatives should be framed not only as greening projects but as components of food justice and livelihood strategies.

5. Participatory Governance and Redistribution of Voice

Democratizing planning processes by ensuring meaningful participation of peri-urban producers, women, and marginalized communities is essential. Participatory land-use decision-making and community land trusts are institutional innovations that can help retain land for food production and manage urban growth in equitable ways.

6. Preserve Agrobiodiversity and Knowledge Systems

Policies must recognize the value of local crop varieties and traditional food knowledge for nutrition and resilience. Conservation of agrobiodiversity in peri-urban areas supports dietary diversity and ecological stability.

These recommendations are interdependent: tenure security without market access may be insufficient; urban agriculture without supportive governance may falter. A sociological approach insists on integrated, equity-focused policies rather than fragmented technical fixes.

VIII. Conclusion

The diminishing of agricultural land in the face of rapid urbanization is not merely a matter of hectares lost; it is a profoundly social phenomenon that reshapes livelihoods, gender relations, and the capacity of communities to secure adequate, nutritious food. The food insecurity emerging from land conversion is produced by power asymmetries, tenure insecurity, market reorientation, and governance failures. Policies that seek to protect food security must therefore address these social roots: secure land rights, inclusive planning, support for peri-urban producers, promotion of local food networks, and participatory governance. Only by recognizing agricultural land as a common good intimately tied to social reproduction and political rights can urbanization be guided toward inclusiveness and full of opportunities rather than threat to food security.

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