



Buffalo City Hosts 2036 World Food Security Conference

Imagine that the author was secretly teleported into the future to 2036, and has returned to the present with a report on a major event that happened in Buffalo City at this future date. This is that report.



By Ronald Eglin, PhD

My Future Series

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Future Food Security Conference - Buffalo City Metro

“ *Global food security can only be achieved if we have local food security* ”



More than 20,000 visitors descended on Buffalo City for the 2036 global conference on 'Local Food Security in a Global World,' co-hosted by the Global Association of Local Authorities (GALA) and the United Nations World Food Security Programme. Tens of thousands more joined via video feeds from all corners of the globe. The conference is part of a campaign initiated by local governments to chart a path towards a global programme for local food security. Commitments were made by local government associations representing more than 80% of the world's population to pursue this goal.

"Global food security can only be achieved if we have local food security," says Ms Patel, the outgoing chairperson of GALA. "We are no longer able, like we were 30, or even 10 years ago, to ship and fly food from one side of the world to the other." Cities have finally woken

up to this reality and have now pledged to become more locally food self-reliant. Ms Patel noted that Buffalo City was chosen to host the conference in recognition of the hard work the city, its higher learning institutions, and other stakeholders have made in demonstrating what a food self-reliant city could look like.

Beyond the main conference at the Eastern Beach Cultural Village Complex, multiple other events took place. Pedestrian streets within the Central Business District and the University Precinct were thronged with people for the kuGompo Food Festival. Chefs and experts in local cuisine from all over the world showcased unique local food flavours, giving presentations and 'teach-ins.' The African Food Arcade, set up on the Civic Centre Square, was a huge hit, with the award-winning interactive web-programme Madiba's Kitchen filming a documentary and a series of live webinars on the history of South African food.

The Agri-Science Conference at the Berlin Agri-Park was also a hive of activity, with presentations and discussions given by local and international experts on topics ranging from agricultural soil science, biofuels, animal husbandry, and food drying.



"Agricultural production is much more scientific in the way it is carried out now than it was in the past," a participant noted. "You can no longer just buy and plant seeds, spray them with artificial chemicals and fertilisers, and hope for the best." Organic agriculture has proven to be a growing field of study, with students learning how to work with nature and not against it. As Mr Nilsson of the Stockholm Bio-mimicry Institute said, "Farming is about soil husbandry." "If you look after the organisms in the soil, the soil will look after you."

The Amathole Institute of Rural Energy, also based at the Berlin Agri-Park, hosted a separate conference on Energy-Hub Technology. The institute is world-renowned for the innovative research work it has done and piloted in the Transkei region on establishing and managing energy hubs in poor rural communities. An energy hub is a local mini-energy grid using energy generated from multiple renewable sources like biogas, solar, and wind for household and local community development purposes. The institute's director, Dr. Thandiwe

Ndlovu, spoke passionately about the project's impact, "These hubs are more than just a power source; they are a catalyst for local empowerment. We've seen communities in the Transkei use this reliable energy to start small businesses, run schools more effectively, and even refrigerate their locally grown produce for the first time, preventing waste and increasing their income." She added that the model is now being replicated in other parts of the world, with delegates from Brazil, India, and Indonesia expressing keen interest in a new partnership programme.

Some of the more rural towns of the Eastern Cape also got in on the action. Organisers of the kuGompo festival, in partnership with the Amathole Periodic Market Association, took the food festival to smaller towns on the periodic market circuit. "My taste buds were in heaven," said Noxolo Mnqumeni, an agricultural student based in Butterworth, "with all the wonderful food flavours from around the world that were available." "I learnt a lot of new tricks on how to grow and cook healthy and tasty food from the interactive learning displays."

The rural food festival component was a deliberate choice by the organisers to ensure the benefits of the global conference were not limited to the metro. "It was crucial to involve our rural partners," said Mrs. Dormer, the event coordinator. "The periodic markets have been the backbone of our regional food system for years, and this was our chance to celebrate and elevate their contribution on a global stage. The delegates loved the authenticity of the experience—it was a true taste of the Eastern Cape."

The concerns expressed prior to the conference about the city's ability to accommodate and move so many delegates proved unfounded, with no major logistical problems reported. Mr Mlandu from the Metro Public Transport Authority stated that the inconvenience faced by commuters over the last few months to complete the new metro bus ring route from East London through Berlin, across the new Buffalo Bridge to Needs Camp, and back to the West Bank and city centre was well worth it. "It allowed us to host a successful international event and leave a public transport legacy for the metro for years to come," he said. Mrs Ching from China said the public transport system "rates up there with the best that China has to offer." "It's very impressive," she added. The new bus route, with its fleet of silent, electric-powered buses, was a major talking point. "The air quality is noticeably better," commented Mr. Mlandu. "And the buses are more than just transport; they're mobile information hubs, with screens displaying local farming news, weather updates, and even the live availability of produce at the city's food markets. It's all part of our integrated approach."

The event was not only an opportunity to debate and nurture a new globally networked, local food self-reliant future, but it was also a chance for Buffalo City to present itself to the world. From comments received from delegates, it appears to have succeeded. Professor Mofana, who grew up in East London (the then name for kuGompo) and was last in the city in about 2015, says she is amazed at the transformation. She remembers growing up in "Slummies", the term people gave for the slow and backward East London, and thinking the city had no future. "There were very few opportunities in East London for someone with drive and ambition," she recalls. "There is now a new confidence in the people of Buffalo City; they seem to have embraced their agricultural roots." She commended the Buffalo City leadership for their foresight in recognizing and acting on the importance of local food security as a driver of local economic development.

"Twenty years ago, I remember seeing dirty streets, and alien vegetation taking over river valleys," said Professor Mofana. "I remember government and communities complaining of the uncontrolled expansion of the city, with farmlands being eaten up by new shack areas, government housing projects, and townhouse developments." Now, however, the former shack areas have been transformed into an urban oasis. There are fruit trees, rainwater detention ponds, and community gardens embedded within all the neighbourhoods. Food is being grown at all scales: in the window sills of flats, on the roofs of high-rise buildings, in the front and back yards of small suburban plots, and on smallholdings and larger commercial farms. The Garden-Plot-Share cooperative programme has made a big difference.

This program is where households who have land but are not using it share the land with members of the cooperative who do not have enough land, to grow fruit and vegetables. "It's a beautiful, symbiotic system," added Professor Mofana. "It not only provides fresh food but also builds a sense of community. The elderly who can no longer tend their gardens are thrilled to see their land producing food again, and the younger families who live in flats get the joy of teaching their children where their food comes from."

"What I like most about the city now," Professor Mofana went on to say, "is the way you can drive from a high-density pedestrian environment with vertical gardens on buildings, into a small valley of smallholder plots growing quality organic produce, through a valley forest and back into an urban neighbourhood." According to Ms Bunguza from the Buffalo City Metro Planning Department, this networked pattern of urban,



rural, and wilderness zones is the result of many years of hard work by the Metro and the Buffalo City Agricultural Land Trust. This non-profit organization purchases development rights from property owners in identified agricultural zones, ensuring these areas remain in agricultural use. It then sells these rights to developers who want to develop at higher-than-normal densities in other parts of the city. "In this way the municipality has been able to control land use within agricultural zones at no cost to government," said Ms Bunguza. "It was a revolutionary idea at the time, and it has paid off spectacularly. We've managed to preserve our productive farmland, protect our critical biodiversity, and still accommodate settlement growth in a smart, sustainable way."

Mrs Dormer, the coordinator of the kuGompo event, who moved to Buffalo City 10 years ago, says she will never return to Gauteng. "Buffalo City is my hometown now," she says. "Gauteng is too busy. There is too much traffic, and people are rushed all the time. Here the pace is much slower - it's a more relaxing environment. It's much better for families," she explains. "You have access to the sea, nature trails and urban farms. Yet at the same time you have big shops, can go to big concerts and have a busy nightlife if you want. Who needs to go to Tuscany for holidays when you can visit the Amathole region with its network of villages and communal lands?" The Amathole region has become a global showcase for responsible, agri-tourism.



Tourists stay in beautifully restored rural homesteads, participating in daily farm life, from milking Nguni cattle to harvesting vegetables, all while learning about the region's rich cultural heritage. "It's a win-win," Mrs Domer noted. "The local communities earn a living from tourism, and visitors get an authentic, enriching experience."

The communal areas of Buffalo City and the Eastern Cape are also contributing to local food security. Dr Tokwe, a world-renowned expert on indigenous African cattle management, commented on the communal land management practices. "Since the mid 2020s, when we finally found each other as communities, government and traditional leaders in relation to the management of communal land, the management of these areas has improved by leaps and bounds," he said. "Xhosa culture is a cattle culture, so it's great to see herds of Nguni and other cattle on well-managed communal grazing land." The rural agricultural lifestyle of these communal areas has also been preserved, with family homesteads in rural villages found along ribbon roads.

Dr Tokwe, whose ancestral family home is in the Kwelerha area, says that he still comes home during the summer holidays. "Family ancestral homes are not for sale," said Dr Tokwe. "I don't think anyone would sell them even if they could. This lifestyle is too priceless." Hiking in these communal areas has turned out to be a popular tourism drawcard.

The local business association has used the conference to showcase Buffalo City as a relaxed lifestyle city where business flourishes. The new bus factory opened by the German vehicle manufacturer five years ago is now competing with the battery-powered commercial car factory, the rugged off-road bicycle factory, and the off-shore wave turbine manufacturing facility to be the largest employer in Buffalo City. The powdered food manufacturing factory is also the largest such facility in Africa, and the mohair and aloe products are sold all over the world. "Buffalo City is no longer a one-factory town," said Mr Botma, the chairman of the Local Business Association. We have a diverse, resilient economy that is deeply rooted in our local resources and expertise."

Mr Botma also anticipates the "Proud Buffalo" brand (the buy-local campaign) will receive a surge of interest following the conference.

The tourism sector is also hoping to build on the exposure the region received. Many delegates interviewed echoed the sentiments of Ms Warren from England. "I plan to bring my family back to Buffalo City and spend some time on the Wild Coast," she said. "I saw the promotional videos of the area at the tourism stand and am intrigued to experience it for myself. Most tourist destinations I have been to were all very busy. The Wild Coast looks like a welcome departure from that entertainment-focused lifestyle." She concluded, "I will stay for at least two weeks and kick off my shoes, soaking in the relaxing atmosphere and friendly hospitality of the local people."

The Buffalo City Metro Mayor, Ms Kunene, who is now also the incoming chairperson of GALA, stated in her closing presentation that this is a historic event for the city. "It has been the crowning glory on a decade-long path we started as a municipality in 2026 when we dedicated ourselves to the vision of a garden city," she said. "We are very proud of the title, 'the city that feeds itself,' given to us by the United Nations World Food Security Programme at the start of this conference, and we commit ourselves to continue to live up to this high praise. Not only are we committed to feed ourselves, but we also commit to showing the world how we can clothe, fuel, and house ourselves." Ms Kunene ended by saying that Buffalo City can be proud of what it has achieved. "We have embraced our agrarian future and led the way for other local municipalities to follow," she stated.

"Yes, with the energy shortages of the recent past, we need to shift gear again towards a more self-reliant economy and society," she said. "This is not about a step backwards to an isolationist future with each locality struggling on its own. It is only through initiatives like GALA, where we share our experiences and collaborate as part of a locally focused but globally networked society, that we will be able to achieve GALA's and the United Nations Food Security Programme's goal of global food security. The future starts with a vision. If we don't dream it, it's unlikely to happen."



(This report from the future ends with a reflection on the power of vision. It's a reminder that a 'garden city' like the one described in 2036 doesn't just happen; it is willed into being by the dreams and hard work of its people. A powerful vision acts like a magnet, pulling us forward and stimulating action in the present to achieve an inspiring future. What are your ideas for a vision for Buffalo City, or any other village, town, city or region, in 2036?)

Buffalo City Metro is not yet on the path to winning any food security award anytime soon. In 2011 the city missed an opportunity to get on this path when it failed to formally approve and implement the Integrated Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy that was developed at the time and can be found [here](#). It's not too late for the metro to review, update and approve a new agricultural and rural development strategy.

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This article forms part of the #WriteYourFutureSA series, written from the perspective of someone living in or time travelling to a future date. Contact info@afesis.org.za if you would like to write your own # write your future article.)

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