

FOOD STRATEGIES IN KENYA :
WHAT ROLE FOR WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Most of Kenya's food is produced by the country's small scale farmers, who in 1979 made up roughly 80 % of the farming population. Up until the end of 1970s, Kenya was able to satisfy the crude per capita daily energy requirements (JIGGINS - 1981). Since 1977 however, food production has increasingly fallen behind the increase in population, which in the last decade has grown at a rate of 4 % annually.

This development has encouraged the Government as well as non-government organizations in the country to review the country's capacity to increase food production and improve the existing farm technology especially among small scale farmers. As a result, increasing number of surveys have been and are continuing to be conducted on food production, distribution and nutritional status of Kenyans.

This paper looks at the data that these studies have generated on the overall food production patterns, the role of women in the production and distribution of food and their potential role in future food strategies given their present role.

1. OVERVIEW OF FOOD PRODUCTION PROCESSES

The first survey of small scale farms in Kenya was not undertaken until 1974/75. Prior to this, government resources was disproportionately directed towards large scale commercial farms and cash crop production on large and small farms. This survey, commonly referred to as the Integrated Rural Survey (IRS) together with Bohdal's (1969) country-

wide nutrition survey conducted between 1964 and 1968, provides the primary data on which subsequent surveys have been based. While more up to date, countrywide surveys are now overdue, these and several other studies especially those done by the Ministries of Agriculture, Health and Livestock, provide enough information on food and nutrition trends prevailing in the country. The salient features of the overall picture can be summarized as follows :

- On the whole, most of the high potential area have been agricultural-ly exploited to the extent where increased production can only be achieved through increase in yields rather than by expansion in acreage (SHAMALLA - 1982).
- It has been shown that the government pricing mechanism on food commodities largely constitutes a disincentive for rural farmers to produce more food (World Bank - 1983).
- Under most circumstances, small holder production (less than 8 hectares) have been shown to be inherently more productive than large scale farming (World Bank - 1983). Government policies are now being redirected towards the acceleration of the going sub-division of large farms into small holdings.
- Small scale farms are frequently prone to natural disasters, particularly droughts and floods which cause food shortages.
- The lack of adequate storage of perishable foodstuffs on small farms has been identified as one of the most important factor in preventing adequate food supplies in rural areas (SHAMALLA - 1981 ; AWITI - 1981). As a result, small scale farmers rush to dispose of their produce immediately after harvest and buys it back later at much higher prices.
- In common with other countries in the region, labour on food crops is supplied predominantly by women and children (FOWLER - 1981). Fowler quotes studies that show children's contribution to farm production being as high as 57 % of total labour.

With regard to nutrition, the fourth Development Plan 1979-1983 summarizes the situation as follows :

There is sufficient food in Kenya to satisfy the nutritional requirements of the population. However, because of inequalities in purchasing power, in supply between districts and fluctuations in availability from one season to another, there are places and times when food is short. This is particularly evident among vul-

nerable groups such as pre-school children and pregnant and lactating mothers *who also often suffer (in addition) from uneven distribution of food within the family*. Figures for malnutrition among pre-school children indicates that about 30 % of them suffer from moderate protein - energy malnutrition (PEM) and 5 % of these have severe marasmus and kwashiorkor. Several groups of people are identified in the plan as being particularly susceptible to food shortages. These include , small scale farmers with very low income (about US \$100 per annum) , certain cash crop growers who have inadequate acreage under food crops , the urban poor with incomes of less than US \$50 per month , pastoralists living in arid and semi arid areas , pregnant and lactating women and pre-school children.

2. PROPOSED FOOD STRATEGIES

The Kenya Government formulated its first national food policy in its fourth development plan 1979-1983. The planned strategies includes all the principles mentioned in the Introductory document of this workshop. These principles appear to have been frequently resorted to in the past with only minor differences in emphasis. The current plan intends to combat the food and nutrition situation without reducing production of export crops which compete with food production on small scale farms.

The policy was formulated within the context of overall poverty alleviation and therefore includes strategies to improve living standards of landless and unemployed rural and urban poor. The key mechanisms in the plan's program for action for increasing production and consumption among the poor small scale farmers are :

- 1/ Encouraging competitive markets for food by reducing Government intervention in food marketing.
- 2/ Reducing prices of consumer goods and increasing prices of agricultural products.
- 3/ Redirection of agricultural research from crops to food crops, and development of appropriate technologies for small scale farms.
- 4/ Increasing employment opportunities on small farms as well as off farm by emphasizing production of labour intensive food crops, particularly protein rich foods, and small livestock.
5. Expansion of agricultural credit schemes to include more small farmers.

As stated before, all these mechanisms have been recommended and implemented before and their impact on small farmers has been extensively analysed and criticized, for example by Killick (1981), Heyer et al. (1976), Heyer et al. (1971) and in World Bank publication on the Kenya economy. The impact of these mechanism on women and their role in small holder production has only recently been investigated (see for instance SMOCK - 1981 ; MONSTED - 1977 ; STANDT - 1975). Women's present role as the major producers of food on small farms for rural and urban consumption has been shown to have been adversely affected by the commercialization of small farm production (HENN - 1983). It is, however, not possible to do justice to the historical developments that have led to their present position in this brief paper. Instead, the paper will present research finding on how women's role and position has been affected by the above policy changes in the past and attempt to point out ways in which women's role has been affected by them.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE PROPOSED FOOD-STRATEGIES ON WOMEN

3.1. Marketing Policy

The government has monopolistic control of domestic and export marketing of both cash and food crops. The effect of this has resulted in price distortions and introduced disincentive among small scale growers. This policy has drawn strong criticism from most researchers in the past two decades and in response the government now plans to allow more competitive marketing of farm produce. However, marketing of foodstuffs outside government control boards, and often illegally, is predominantly handled by women. Competitive marketing may not however have much effect on prices of foodstuffs sold in these informal markets which are not usually subject to government control. Competition may even result in lower incomes for women who operate without the benefit of well organized marketing structures as a result of competition from large scale private marketing bodies. Because most of women's marketing is in the informal sector, very little reliable information is available about their incomes from this activity. This aspect need to be studied more closely.

3.2. Pricing Policy

The plan notes that in the past, pricing policies were directed at protecting import substituting industries and hence maintaining prices of domestically produced good above their international level. The plan notes that the resulting high consumer goods prices have not been to the benefit of rural and urban poor. Although the plan implies that these policies will be revised during the plan period, it is to be noted that since the publication of Development Plan (DP4), in 1979, there has not been a significant decrease in consumer good prices and indeed prices of most commodities have gone up. Critics of the DP4, for example, Killick (1981) had pointed out that the plan policies given in DP4 and the plan's targets were overly optimistic and based on unrealistic expectations, especially with regards to the international prices of export commodities such as coffee and tea which provides the bulk of the country's foreign exchange. Killick points out that while emphasis is placed on increasing domestic savings, there is little in the policies set forth likely to produce such a result. The plan proposed no anti-monopoly policies to indicate any serious attempt by government to remedy the high cost of domestically produced consumer goods. There is therefore reasons to be sceptical about the realization of the intended benefits to small scale farmers through the proposed pricing policy changes.

3.3. Research Re-orientation

The benefits accruing from agricultural research to farmers are not usually felt for sometime, and in the case of small farms, past experience has shown that, on the whole, research directed to small farm conditions are in most cases inapplicable (HEYER - 1976). Beside this, the small farmer, who in Kenya is often likely to be an illiterate woman, is usually unable to follow research recommendations, which among other things, tend to demand inputs beyond her level of income and requires additional labour which she cannot afford being already overburdened with farm and household duties. It is unlikely that this policy change will have any significant impact on women, at least on short-term.

3.4. Increased on Farm and off Farm Employment

Women are known to suffer high rates of unemployment both in the rural and urban settings. The Government plan to increase on farm employment by emphasizing labour intensive production is not only unrealistic, but also likely to over burden small farmers, particularly the women. This policy if implemented would affect women negatively in another direction ; large rural population, which this approach intends to bring about, increases rural women's work load in such activities as the collection of firewood, water and fodder through the overexploitation of the more easily available sources. Women have then to spend more time and energy in meeting their requirements of these items and hence less time to spare for income generating activities. In addition to this, small scale farms absorb labour only at very low incomes. A small farmer's easiest way of raising income is by growing cash crops. According to the Integrated Rural Survey (IRS) 1974-75, approximately half of the total value of food consumed in small holders household come from purchased items. This development is a result of commercialization of small scale farms which reduces the amount of food produced on such farms. Since women contribute labour in cash crop production as well as food crops, during peak labour period, women have less time for domestic duties including caring of children, who suffer from malnutrition during these periods. This observation is supported by the IRS survey findings that the highest malnutrition incidence among children occurred in the Central Province, which has the highest percentage of commercialized agriculture on small scale farms.

3.5. Expansion of Agricultural Credit

Women's access to credit facilities has always been rather limited since most of them do not own the land they work in. It is unlikely that the proposed mechanism will change this situation at all since no provision was made in the plan to take women's legal status into account.

CONCLUSION

Without going into too much detail, the above account attempted to show that on the whole the position of women in the Kenya's food production and consumption is unlikely to be improved and in fact likely to worsen with the implementation of the current government plan. The plan also fall short of provising realistic mechanism for the alleviation of poverty and improvement of food supply and nutrition in the country in general. Killick summarizes the government policy in relation to women as follows :

A neglect of the special vulnerability of women to economic deprivation is another serious omission in a plan written round the theme of poverty alleviation. The economic situation of many Kenyan women is, in fact, especially precarious. They suffer inferior access to education and high level employment opportunities ; women in rural areas are often left to look after both the family and the shamba while the menfolk go to the towns in search of wage employment ; households headed by women have lower average incomes and a higher incidence of poverty. However, this inequity receives no recognition in the Development Plan whose only acknowledgement that there maybe a problem is the routinely pious statement that "The Government will continue to encourage the elimination of male/female differentials in earning and also ensure diversification of women's participation in the modern sector.

More specifically, while the plan recognize that pre-school children, lactating and pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and food shortages, it does not specify any mechanism for redressing this situation. At the same time it is recognized that the large size of the Kenyan family, averaging some eight children, means that the rural women perform their economic roles amidst a continuing cycle of pregnancy, child birth and child dependency. Studies have shown that the highest incidence of malnutrition and morbidity among children occurs during peak labour periods when the women's attention is on farm activities (SMOCK - 1981). By emphasizing labour intensive production, at even lower incomes, implementation of the proposed programme of action can only be to the detriment of women and their efforts to be self sufficient in food and the improvement of their families dietary intakes.

In conclusion it is highly doubtful that the overall conditions of small farmers in general and those of women can be significantly changed without a comprehensive restructuring of the whole social relations of production and reproduction that have led to the present disadvantageous position of small scale farmers as a whole and women in particular. The proposed strategies gives no indication that the government is planning to undertake any such measures.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the first attempt by the Kenya Government to address its development plan towards poverty alleviation in the country in general, and the rural areas in particular. The paper attempts to show that while the official government document, the Development Plan No. 4, is full of general statements suggesting a deep concern with rural poverty, none of the mechanisms suggested in the plan have been implemented to date. In any case, the paper tries to show that the Development Plan only paid lip service to the problem of inequality and completely fails to address itself to the underlying causes of inequality. The mechanisms suggested are therefore unlikely to redirect government resources to benefit the disadvantaged people in general and women in particular.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette communication examine la première tentative du gouvernement du Kenya, d'orienter son plan de développement vers la lutte contre la pauvreté dans l'ensemble du pays, et particulièrement dans les zones rurales. Elle montre, d'autre part, que si le document officiel du gouvernement, à savoir le plan de développement N° 4, exprime un profond souci pour la pauvreté rurale, aucun des mécanismes proposés par ce plan n'a encore été mis en oeuvre. Dans l'ensemble, l'auteur tente de montrer que le Plan de Développement n'accorde qu'une attention de pure forme à l'inégalité en ignorant totalement ses causes. Les mesures proposées sont donc peu susceptibles de réorienter les ressources publiques au profit des personnes défavorisées en général, et des femmes en particulier.