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Research Paper

Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Food Security and Nutrition in Kenya: A Case of Embu West Sub County, Embu County

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Abstract

Globally, food is the most basic of all human needs. However, FAO fears that global progress in reducing hunger has slowed and leveled off. In Africa, causes of food insecurity and malnutrition are multi-factorial and interlinked. World health organization asserts that the global food price crisis threatens public health and jeopardizes the health of the most disadvantaged groups. Over 80 per cent of the households in the county depend on rain fed agriculture and related activities to achieve food security. Only about 60% of the Kenyan population can be said to be currently food secure. Embu West Sub County has experienced a fall in food production which is a risk of hunger and malnutrition. Therefore, the study was interested in investigating how the socio-cultural factors affect food security and nutrition in Embu West Sub County. This will inform policy formulation in Embu County and Kenya as a whole. The study used a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the study subjects. Interview schedules were used to collect data. The study found that Khat chewing, alcohol uptake, and FGM had a negative impact on food security and nutrition. The study recommends awareness creation on effects of chewing Khat, alcohol uptake and FGM in Embu West Sub County.

Key words: social, cultural, food security, nutrition, Embu

1.0 Introduction

Globally, food is the most basic of all human needs. The global community often uses the term “food security” to describe a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2002). Nutrition is the study of food and how it affects the body. A study carried out by FAO indicates that with almost 1 billion people chronically undernourished between 2015–2017, the number of hungry people in the world remains unacceptably high. The vast majority live in developing countries, where about 15 percent of the population is estimated to be undernourished (FAO, 2018).

In Africa, causes of food insecurity and malnutrition are multi-factorial and interlinked. Poverty and food shortage are the main catalysts of food insecurity in Africa. Despite the fairly good economic growth rate in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades, there is historical evidence that this has not been converted into poverty reduction as effectively as in other developing regions of the world (Olayemi, 2016).

About half of the Kenyan population falls below the poverty line. Some of these are residents in relatively well-endowed counties and urban areas. Among these are those living in extreme poverty. Chronically food insecure people suffer from extreme poverty and are largely left to their own devices with no access to some of the safety net provisions available to those suffering from acute food shortages in drought and flood prone areas (Haile, 2005).

Only about 60% of the Kenyan population can be said to be currently food secure. According to Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019), about 10 million of an estimated 46 million people in Kenya suffers from chronic food insecurity, based on dietary energy supply. Food insecurity and malnutrition are closely linked to poverty. Kenya Strategic Food Reserve (2018) increased the projected number of people requiring emergency food assistance between September 2016 and February 2017 to 6.8 million individuals.

Despite the efforts and initiatives by the National and County Governments to attain food security and nutrition, much has not been achieved in Embu and more

particularly in Embu West Sub County. One of the objectives of this study therefore, was to investigate the effects of socio-cultural factors on food security and nutrition in Embu West Sub County, Embu County.

2.0 Methodology

The study used a qualitative research design and purposive sampling technique. The study location was Embu West Sub County which is an electoral constituency in Kenya. It is one of four constituencies of Embu County. It has a population of 154,632 people based on the Kenya Population and Housing Census with a density of 575 KM² (KNBS, 2019). Temperature ranges from a minimum of 12 °C to a maximum of 27.0 °C. The average annual rainfall is 1495mm.

The study purposively selected four key informants situated in Embu West Sub County. That is the Assistant County Commissioner, Sub County Agricultural Officer, Public Health Officer at Embu level 5 Hospital and the Assistant Director KALRO (Kenya Agricultural and Livestock and Research Organization). This was due to the fact that they would be in a position to address the issues raised on the effects of socio-cultural factors on food security and nutrition in Embu West Sub County. One research instrument was used, namely an interview schedule. Qualitative data was analyzed using text method. The data was then interpreted, viable conclusions drawn and recommendations made based on the conclusions arrived at.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This study found that the following social practices in Embu West Sub County: chewing of khat, alcohol taking, religious settings such as Christianity, Islam and Hindu, membership to welfare groups and merry go rounds as indicated in table 3.1. These findings are in agreement with those of Mutumi (2013) who found that drugs such as khat and alcohol were in use in Embu County. Cultural practices included religious activities, female genital mutilation (FGM) and boys' circumcision.

Table 3.1: Predominant social and cultural practices in Embu West Sub County

	Social practices	Cultural practices
ACC	None	Christianity and Islam
SCAO	Chewing Khat Alcohol taking	None
PHO	Chewing Khat Alcohol taking. Membership to women welfare groups (Kameretu).	FGM
ADK	Alcohol taking Chewing khat Women Welfare groups	Christianity, Islam and Hindu. Circumcision after class 8

Key: ACC - Assistant County Commissioner, SCAO - Sub County Agricultural officer, PHO - Public health officer, ADK - Assistant Director KALRO

This study went ahead to investigate the effect of the social and cultural practices and its effect on food security and nutrition. The study found the following negative effects:

- i. Some farmers had stopped growing food crops and were now concentrating on khat growing as a cash crop as shown in table 3.2.
- ii. Youths who took up alcohol were unproductive and did not attend to their farming activities.
- iii. Most of the resources obtained by men were used to purchase drugs such as khat and alcohol.
- iv. Single young mothers were on the increase due to women empowerment while men were becoming endangered.
- v. There was also a rise in poor nutrition status and oral health issues due to use of khat.
- vi. Children learned how to chew khat early as they were employed in the khat farms for some payment.

Some positive effect of the socio-cultural practices at Embu West Sub County was that people were coming together in groups and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the government were willing to help the groups and share ideas when together. This in turn leads to an increase in productivity and nutrition. These finding are similar to those of Njeru (2016) who found that socio-cultural practices affected agricultural practices in Embu County.

Table 3.2: Practices and behaviors that affect food security and nutrition in Embu West Sub County

	Effect on food security and nutrition
ACC	No effect
SCAO	Reduced production.
PHO	There is poor nutrition status and oral health issues are on the rise.
ADK	Some affect positively Negatively due to drinking affects.

Key: ACC - Assistant County Commissioner, SCAO - Sub County Agricultural officer, PHO - Public health officer, ADK - Assistant Director KALRO

This study found out that there were no foods that were a taboo in Embu West Sub County. The most commonly consumed food was maize, beans and vegetables as indicated in table 3.3. This is in agreement with the finding of Embu County Agriculture report (2019) which identified the same types of foods grown in the constituency.

Table 3.3 Foods that are a taboo in Embu West Sub County

	Taboo foods	Food mostly consumed
ACC	No	Maize, beans and vegetables
SCAO	None	Maize, beans and vegetables
PHO	None	Maize and beans
ADK	None	Not mentioned

Key: ACC - Assistant County Commissioner, SCAO - Sub County Agricultural officer, PHO - Public health officer, ADK - Assistant Director KALRO

All the respondents except one indicated to there being a food program that creates awareness on food safety and nutrition in Embu West Sub County (table 3.4.). The food programs were run by collaborators, stakeholders and partners who fund the agricultural activities. There were also seed companies which come to train farmers on good agricultural practices and hold demonstrations for their products. Example of partners: Africa Christian Church & Schools (ACC&S), Solidaridad, One acre fund, Kenya seed, agrochemical companies, Simlaw seeds, East Africa seed company, KALRO, The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Caritas (Catholic Organization) etc. In the hospital set up it was identified that there was health education and nutrition trainings. There was also the school feeding programmes in Early Childhood Educations (ECDs). The PHO also noted that the nutritional status of

Embu County was 29% at that time. This is in agreement to a study by Githuku (2015) who identified feeding programs and their impact on food security and nutrition.

Table 3.4: Food programs in Embu West Sub County and how they conduct their activities

	Food programs	Activities Conduct
ACC	None	N/A
SCAO	ACC&S Solidaridad One acre fund Kenya seed Agrochemical companies Simlaw seeds East Africa seed company	Training Collaborations Partnerships Demonstrations
PHO	Hospitals Schools.	Health education and nutrition School feeding programmes
ADK	KALRO FAO Caritas (Catholic Organization)	Trainings

Key: ACC - Assistant County Commissioner, SCAO - Sub County Agricultural officer, PHO - Public health officer, ADK - Assistant director KALRO

4.0 Conclusion

This study sought to find out the effect of socio-cultural factors on food security and nutrition in Embu West Sub County. This study found that socio-cultural activities such as khat chewing, alcohol use, initiation and FGM had negative impact on food security and nutrition, while welfare groups and religious activities had a positive impact on food security and nutrition in Embu West Sub County.

5.0 Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the recommendations are:

1. Awareness creation on effects of chewing Khat, alcohol uptake and FGM
2. Standardize prices and marketing of farm products to prevent farmers from replacing food crops to khat.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

This study does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors. Research authorization was sought from the director Kenya School of Government.

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