

THE INFLUENCE OF SELECTED SOCIAL PRACTICES ON FOOD SECURITY IN BENUE STATE

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ABSTRACT

The study was designed to investigate the influence of three social practices (burial rites, alcohol consumption and polygyny) on food security in Benue State. A sample of 288 farmers from three agro-ecological zones was used. Findings showed that up to 80 percent of farmers were food insecure; 20.3 percent of polygynous families were food secure compared to 17.9 percent of monogamous families. Results also showed that 15 percent of alcohol consumers were food secure compared to 25 percent of abstainers. Results of Chi-square analysis indicated an insignificant relationship between burial rites and food security ($\chi^2=0.477$, $df=1$, $p=0.309$). The logistical regression analysis also confirmed this ($p=.759$, Exp [B] .861). The result also showed a significant relationship between alcohol consumption and food security ($\chi^2= 3.939$, $df= 1$, $p=0.047$). It was concluded that some social practices have the potential to promote food insecurity, and it was suggested among others that attitude and behaviour change programmes be initiated to discourage such practices.

Key words: Food security, socio-cultural practices, burial rites, alcohol consumption, polygyny.

INTRODUCTION

Food security has many definitions but it essentially refers to 'access by all people at all times to safe and nutritious food needed to maintain a healthy and active life' (FAO, 2001). The proportion of people with inadequate food energy consumption has declined in all regions except Sub-Saharan Africa (Theones, 2004). The food security outlook for Nigeria as reported by most studies is especially bleak. For instance Sanusi *et al.*, (2006) reported that 18 percent of Nigerian households were food insecure in 1986 and that this figure went up to 40 percent in 2005. Food insecurity has been attributed to several factors but there is a growing consensus that poverty is at the root of food insecurity (Australian Government AusAID, 2004; Morris, 2001; Mohammed-Lawal and Omotesho, 2004). Food security remains a cardinal goal of governments globally because only a food secure population can participate meaningfully in economic activities in both agrarian and

industrial settings. Impressive statistics and macro-economic indicators often veil grave scenarios of food insecurity as there have been reported quantum leaps in agricultural output occurring *pari pasu* with food insecurity (Hall, 1992). This is often associated with distributive imperfections of the capitalist mode of production (Okuneye, 2003). Omonona and Agoi (2007) believe there is enough domestic food production in Nigeria, and that food insecurity can be attributed to poor storage, marketing and distribution arrangements which greatly reduce food availability.

For emerging economies like Nigeria, socio-cultural practices could also work against food security. This study was designed to investigate the influence of three such practices on food security, namely: burial rites, alcohol consumption and polygyny. In the past two decades traditional burial norms have undergone serious transformation toward ostentation and extravagance

plunging many households into debt (Mnda, 2005; Idyorough, 2002). Alcohol consumption which is on the ascendency has also been implicated in depressing family incomes and diverting funds that could have been invested in family nutrition (Saxena, 1997; Munne, 2004). Moreover, the production of local alcoholic beverages provides stiff competition for the communities' food grains (WHO, 2004). Polygyny, has also been associated with aggravating poverty, and depressed living conditions in most regions of the developing world (Anderson, 2000; Government of Canada, 2005). These socio-cultural factors merit empirical investigation in order to establish a factual basis for developing policies that would address food insecurity.

METHODOLOGY

The study area for this research is Benue state in the Guinea Savannah Belt of Central Nigeria. The major ethnic groups in Benue State include Tiv, Idoma, Igede. Rainfed subsistence agriculture is practiced by a majority of the rural population. Administratively, the State is divided into 23 Local Government Areas, which are grouped into three Senatorial Zones.

A sample of 288 was obtained by a combination of purposive and simple random procedures. The study covered a total of six local Government Areas. Two Local Government Areas were randomly selected from the three senatorial zones, with Oju Local Government Area purposively selected in order to ensure the inclusion of the Igede ethnic group. Twenty-four farmers were selected from each of two council wards, which were in turn selected from each of two local government areas selected. The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the selected socio-cultural practices and food security was tested using logistical regression and Chi-square. To obtain the binary variables 'food secure' (1) and 'food insecure' (0) two scales were developed and integrated. On the first scale respondents were required to state how often they

consumed the various classes of food on a 4-point scale of 'daily,' '2-3 times a week,' 'once a week' and 'occasionally/don't take.' The second scale required respondents to state their perception of the quantities of the food they took on a 4-point scale of 'very adequate,' 'fairly adequate,' 'inadequate,' and 'grossly inadequate.' The score of 2.5 was arrived at after integrating the two scales and this served as the critical point between food secure and food insecure. Data analysis was done using Chi-square and logistical regression with the SPSS Version 14 software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic Characteristics and Food Security

The overall data from the study revealed that eighty percent of the farmers were food insecure while only 20 percent were food secure. Further analysis of the data in Table 1 revealed that the proportion of polygynous respondents that were food secure was 20.3 percent and 17.9 percent among the monogamous. This shows that polygynous families had a slight advantage over monogamous families in terms of food security. Those between 25-34 years old were the most food secure with 25 percent, followed closely by the 15-24 group (23.1 percent) and the 35-44 years (20.2 percent). The results (Table 1) also show that those who abstained from alcohol consumption experienced higher food security (25.6 percent) than those who drank (15.9 percent). Furthermore, it was revealed that educational attainment coincided with food security. Eleven percent of those without formal education were food secure, 9.3 of those with primary education were food secure compared to 26.2 percent of the secondary school graduates reported food security. Respondents with tertiary education had the highest rate of food security (34 percent). Among those who borrowed, only 14.3 percent were food secure compared to 29.8 percent of those who did not borrow who enjoyed food security.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Socio-economic Characteristics (n=288)

| | Food security | | Total |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Insecure | Secure | |
| Food security by marriage type | | | |
| Monogamous | 101 (82.1)* | 22 (17.9) | 123 (100.0) |
| Polygynous | 55 (79.7) | 14 (20.3) | 69 (100.0) |
| Total | 156 (81.3) | 36 (18.8) | 192 (100.0) |
| Food security by age (years) | | | |
| 15-24 | 20 (76.9) | 6 (23.1) | 26 (100.0) |
| 25-34 | 53 (74.6) | 18 (25.4) | 71 (100.0) |
| 35-44 | 67 (79.8) | 17 (20.2) | 84 (100.0) |
| 45-54 | 39 (83.0) | 8 (17.0) | 47 (100.0) |
| 55-64 | 18 (90.0) | 2 (10.0) | 20 (100.0) |
| 65+ | 22 (84.6) | 4 (15.4) | 26 (100.0) |
| Total | 219 (79.9) | 55 (20.1) | 274 (100.0) |
| Food security by alcohol consumption | | | |
| Alcohol consumers | 127 (84.1) | 24 (15.9) | 151 (100.0) |
| Alcohol Abstainers | 90 (74.4) | 31 (25.6) | 121 (100.0) |
| Total | 217 (79.8) | 55 (20.2) | 272 (100.0) |

*Figures in brackets represent percentages

TABLE 1 CONT.

| | Food security | | Total |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| | Not secure | Secure | |
| Food security by educational attainment | | | |
| None | 52 (88.1) | 7 (11.9) | 59 (100.0) |
| Primary | 68 (90.7) | 7 (9.3) | 75 (100.0) |
| Secondary | 62 (73.8) | 22 (26.2) | 84 (100.0) |
| Tertiary | 35 (66.0) | 18 (34.0) | 53 (100.0) |
| Total | 217 (80.1) | 54 (19.9) | 271 (100.0) |
| Food security by indebtedness | | | |
| Indebted | 144 (85.7) | 24 (14.3) | 168 (100.0) |
| Not indebted | 73 (70.2) | 31 (29.8) | 104 (100.0) |
| Total | 217 (79.8) | 55 (20.2) | 272 (100.0) |

*Figures in brackets represent percentages

Table 2. Influence of selected social practices on food security

| | χ^2 | df | P |
|-----------------|----------|----|--------|
| Burial expenses | 0.477 | 1 | 0.490 |
| Alcohol | 3.939 | 1 | 0.047* |
| Polygyny | 0.169 | 1 | 0.682 |

Influence of socio-cultural practices on food security

The chi-square test and logistical regression was used to test the hypothesis that food security is not significantly related to

selected social practices. Results from Table 2 indicate an insignificant relationship between food security and burial rites ($\chi^2=0.477$, $df=1$, $p=0.309$). The results of the logistical regression in Table 3 confirm this ($p=.759$, Exp (B) 0.861). The results showed that farmers who were bereaved and had to spend money burying the dead were not more likely to be food insecure than farmers who were not bereaved. This may indicate a surplus being produced such that even after being lavishly used to prosecute funerals, enough still remains for the farm families to live on. If this is the case then it highlights the influence that the economy has on cultural evolution.

It is generally recognized that when a society successfully conquers the battle for survival it can indulge in luxurious pursuits. In the case of the rural farmers of Benue State however, this principle applies in a negative and temporary sense, and by default in the sense that the surplus is only apparent. It may be the result of severe lack of market access occasioned by deplorable and sometimes inaccessible roads. Taken together with the undeveloped and inefficient traditional storage capacity, farmers at certain times have in their hands more produce than they require for immediate consumption which they can commit to such ventures as burial rites. However it should be noted that there exists a hunger season (known as *june* among the Tiv and *okpeta* among the Idoma) in most parts of the country, and indeed the developing world, when food stocks are severely depleted (Holenstein, 2001). It comes just before early harvest. At this time most of the previous season's output is used up (or lost to poor storage), and its vestiges also used as seed stock. Almost all of the focus groups indicated that modern burial rites aggravated the hunger season. So the idea of food security should be seen as applying to the season of plenty. Another plausible explanation is the fact that rural dwellers are beginning to diversify their

diets. Food items like groundnuts and soybeans that were hitherto produced as cash crops are finding their way into the menu of most farm families, thus balancing up their diets to a large extent. The Benue State Agricultural and Rural Development Agency (BNARDA) and several other organizations have been educating rural people on the nutritional value of the food items they usually have which they seldom use.

The Chi-square test (Table 1) showed a significant relationship between alcohol consumption and food security ($\chi^2= 3.939$, $df= 1$, $p=0.047$). The logit analysis, however, showed an insignificant relationship between food security and alcohol consumption. This nevertheless, does not negate the Chi-square results since a positive relationship (though weak) is indicated. The results imply that farmers who consume alcohol are more likely to be food insecure than those who do not consume the substance. Given the finite nature of incomes in the rural areas occasioned by poor market access and low value addition to agricultural produce, any additional expenditure such as represented by that on alcohol consumption is bound to impact negatively on the ability of a farmer to access adequate and nutritious food.

Table 3. Logit analysis of food security and selected social practices

| | | B | S.E. | Wald | Df | Sig. | Exp(B) |
|-----------|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|
| Step 1(a) | burial | -0.150 | 0.490 | 0.094 | 1 | 0.759 | 0.861 |
| | alcohol | 0.563 | 0.384 | 2.147 | 1 | 0.143 | 1.756 |
| | polygyny | 0.323 | 0.407 | 0.632 | 1 | 0.427 | 1.382 |
| | Constant | -2.487 | 1.455 | 2.921 | 1 | 0.087 | 0.083 |

Results of tested hypothesis showed that there was no significant relationship between polygyny and food security. The Chi-square test result in Table 1 ($\chi^2=.169$, $df=1$, $p=.682$) is corroborated by the logit analysis in Table 2 ($p=.827$). The null hypothesis is, therefore,

accepted and the alternative hypothesis rejected. This finding contrasts with the dominant view supported by research that polygamy correlates with depressed living standards (Mohler and Welch, 2004; Anderson, 2000; Government of Canada,

2005). In the traditional rural setting where survival depends to a large extent on a web of social relationships, polygyny may provide a wider web of such relationships. Polygynous families have more relatives and in-laws to turn to in times of distress, in addition to the fact that they represent a kind of cooperative who pool efforts together to achieve higher productivity. Even where such cooperation does not exist, the atmosphere of competition found in many polygamous homes may serve as an incentive for higher productivity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Socio-cultural practices were found to promote food insecurity among farmers in Benue State. The persistence of such harmful practices, therefore, portends a gloomy future as far as agricultural production is concerned, since food security is a key index of development. The study also demonstrated that food insecurity could exist in spite of salutary performance in agricultural production. This implies that the problem of food security may lie beyond the traditional explanations of low productivity, wars/conflicts, economic crises etc. these must be considered hand in hand with socio-cultural practices which have location-specific expressions and consequences on food security. Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made:

1. Socio-cultural analysis should be integrated into strategies aimed at redressing food insecurity.
2. Attitudinal and behaviour change programmes should be initiated to discourage the people from these practices by enlightening them about the ultimate effects of such practices.
3. The efforts of the major church denominations who fix short burial periods for members should be complemented by legislation against open sale of chemicals used for embalment. This will discourage or pre-empt extravagant burial ceremonies.

4. The existing regulations regarding alcohol sale and consumption should be vigorously enforced to reduce abuse. Alcoholic beverage companies should be taxed and the proceeds used in assuaging some of the damage caused by alcohol consumption.

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