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Understanding the Pathways to Improved Diets from the Production of Nutritious and Marketable Commodities

NOORA-LISA ABERMAN¹, TERRENCE ROOPNARAIN²

¹*International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), United States of America*

²*Independent Consultant, Canada*

Abstract

Value chains and agricultural commercialisation are increasingly being promoted as mechanisms for agricultural transformation, inclusive growth, and, more recently, improving food security and diets. Theoretically, market-oriented production should allow farmers to increase their incomes and purchase more nutritious foods. Furthermore, crops that are both nutritious and commercially viable can overcome the inherent risks in engaging in markets because they can be consumed if market prices are not profitable. However, there is limited empirical understanding of the pathways through which such production impacts diets. Given Malawi's high stunting rates and current policy focus on commercialisation of the agriculture sector, the implications of commercialisation for diets and nutrition is highly relevant here.

This qualitative study contributes to the empirical understanding of this issue by examining gendered household preferences and decisionmaking dynamics related to the production, consumption, and sale of nutritious commodities. We analysed 80 individual interviews from a sample of households in 3 districts in Malawi.

Respondents had a relatively good understanding of nutrition; however, it was not seen as a priority issue compared to other criteria underlying their food decisions. Food security was top-most and was largely reflected in concerns about maintaining sufficient supplies of maize. Needs for cash are numerous and important, but people avoid selling food crops if they do not feel they can meet their immediate food needs with their stocks.

While financial barriers were the most commonly mentioned barriers to purchasing preferred or nutritious foods in the market, lack of availability was also important. Many nutritious crops that households produce are both consumed and sold. Decisions about what or how much to sell are based on consideration of a range of factors.

While respondents tended to reject the idea of men's and women's crops, on the whole, they tended to conform to stereotypical gendered roles in terms of men having more power over crops with high exchange value rather than those produced primarily for consumption. Soybean, groundnut, and maize fit into a unique category as they play an important dual role for household consumption and as commodities and, thus, a dual role in terms of gendered control.

Keywords: Africa, agriculture, commercialisation, gender, Malawi