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Food Habits Matter: Investigating the Consumption of African Indigenous Vegetables in Kenya

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Abstract

Kenya is confronted with a paradoxical situation of malnutrition: on the one hand hunger is still prevalent within the Kenyan society with 24 % of the population being undernourished; on the other hand an increasing number of the population is suffering obesity and “hidden hunger”. In order to overcome malnutrition in Kenya recent studies emphasise the relevance of African indigenous vegetables (AIVs), which are nutrient rich and contain medicinal value. Although AIVs are an important component of households’ diets in Kenya, AIV consumption is still low. Thus, this paper aims at investigating the factors that influence consumption of AIVs in Kenyan households.

This paper presents first research results of the HORTINLEA subproject “Meal Cultures in Market Trends and Consumption Habits”. The paper starts from the assumption that place-based practices of food production and preparation, symbolic meanings of food as well as social relations of power frame the consumption of food. Referring to the concept of “Meal Security” we argue that it is necessary to take account of socio-cultural aspects of food practices when analysing food security.

First findings of the study reveal that the consumption of AIVs differs due to place-based, ethnic and gendered practices of food production and preparation. The paper starts with, firstly, presenting the conceptual framework of the social embeddedness of food habits and meal cultures. Afterwards, the main research results will be presented. The paper will, for instance, show that food habits and meal cultures are significantly affected by the gender division of labour: provision, preparation and serving AIVs is mainly women’s work. Consumption of AIVs is negatively affected by the time-consuming preparation processes, like plucking, washing and cooking. Finally, the paper will draw conclusions on how to link the concept of meal security to issues of food and nutrition security by analysing contexts at household level, which may not be visible at first glance but significantly influence the acceptability and accessibility of leafy vegetables.

Keywords: African indigenous vegetables (AIVs), food habits, gender, meal security