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The Social Role of Food Vendors in Nutrition Security and Information Dissemination in Turkana County, Kenya

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Abstract

This Food environment (FE) study was conducted in Turkana County, Kenya, which is characterised by a harsh climate, high poverty levels, and remoteness. A vendor analysis was conducted across Lodwar town, and 10 rural community health units (CHU) randomly selected in Loima and Turkana South sub-counties.

The vendor analysis contained three components. First, geocoding of approximately 380 vendors throughout the area of interest. The distribution of geocoded vendors was: Kiosks/Retail Shops (53 %), Roadside Vendors (14 %), Wholesalers (11 %), Restaurants (10 %), Mobile Vendors (4 %), Open Air Markets (3 %), Street Hawkers (2 %), and Supermarkets (1 %).

Second, a stratified sample was taken to select four vendors per vendor type. With this sample, enumerators conducted a full inventory of the food and drink items they sold. In part 3, enumerators conducted in-depth interviews regarding the vendors' businesses.

Data suggests food vendors play a key social role in their communities. For example, 84 % of vendors reported a willingness to sell food items on credit to community members in need, including the poor, disabled, and elderly. These vendors may act as a small safety net for their community.

Vendors also expressed interest in disseminating nutrition information, with 45 % reporting they at least “sometimes” give nutrition advice to customers. When asked about the “healthiest” foods, most vendors cited vegetables (72 %), fruits (65 %), and pulses (58 %). When asked about the “least healthy” foods, most vendors cited alcohol (72 %), and Soda (35 %). However, when discussing unhealth food items, vendors cited grains/white roots/tubers/plantains (16 %) and nuts/seeds (14 %), as often as they cited candy (14 %), and crisps/ cookies/ crackers (14%).

Although food vendors are rarely included in nutrition programs and policy discussions related to food security, they play a key role within the food environment. Their willingness to help community members through credit and nutrition advice could be utilised to enhance food and nutrition security.

Organizations working in LMICs should 1) engage vendors in nutrition and agriculture programming, and 2) highlight the importance of diverse, nutritious diets, which include traditional staples. This will improve the accuracy of vendors' nutrition advice, as well as empower vendors to take further actions to ensure food and nutrition security in their communities.

Keywords: Food environment, Kenya, LMICs, nutrition security, vendor analysis

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