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Perceptions on criteria influencing complementary food choices among (agro) pastoralist mothers in northern Kenya

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Abstract

Mothers’ child-feeding practices vary depending on environmental, social, economic and cultural conditions that influence their personal food environments and hence criteria for food choice. In Kenya, child feeding practices vary within populations even in similar geographical areas. This study aims at understanding reasons for these differences by investigating mothers’ perceptions on criteria belonging to their personal food environment and how they evaluate main food items according to these criteria.

The study was conducted in Marsabit county, Northern Kenya. Mothers are classified according to location (urban, peri-urban, rural) and ethnicity (Borana, Rendille, Sakuye, Burji) with their respective livelihood focus. Qualitative methods were used where 13 focus group discussions were conducted with 4 women groups; 1 rural Rendille (pastoral), 1 rural Burji (agricultural), 1 peri-urban Sakuye (agro-pastoral), and 1 urban Borana (agro-pastoral). Common food items used for child feeding were listed followed by rating of foods (from 5 to 0) against these criteria; healthiness, child acceptance, availability/accessibility, affordability and convenience.

Marked differences were found between the foods used by rural livestock-keeping Rendille and the other three groups focusing on crop-farming and/or on purchased food. Availability, accessibility and affordability were all linked to local food production and seasons. To make food items affordable, mothers bought them in small quantities and on credit. Healthiness was related to hygiene, foods that boosted immunity, nutrient-rich and promoted child growth. Time used to prepare food, fuel and water needed in cooking the foods determined convenience. Preparation processes such as fermentation and dehulling made foods less convenient whereas ready-to-eat foods and mixed dishes were convenient. Children liked soft, tasty and sweet foods but also having a variety increased desirability. Cultural foods unique to specific ethnic groups were liked by their children but not by those of other ethnic groups.

This study shows mothers’ perceptions on their food environment. It reveals the similarities and differences in perceptions and practices among mothers from one region but different specific locations and ethnicities. These insights are important to inform efforts to improve child feeding practices as they need to consider mothers’ food environments with their opportunities and limitations to create appropriate interventions.

Keywords: (Agro)pastoralists, child foods, food choices, food environment, mothers, northern Kenya, perceptions, rating