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A photovoice study on the influence of the built food environment on individuals' food choices

LUCY APIYO ADUNDO^{1,2}, RAMONA TEUBER², TOSIN AKINGBEMISILU³, JOOST DESSEIN¹

¹*Ghent University, Dept. of Agricultural Economics, Belgium*

²*Justus Liebig University Giessen, Inst. of Agric. Policy and Market Res., Germany*

³*The Alliance of Bioversity International & CIAT, Food Environment and Consumer Behaviour, Kenya*

Abstract

Food environment is described as the interface where individuals interact within the wider food system to acquire and consume their foods. It encompasses availability, convenience, affordability, quality and promotion, and sustainability of foods and beverages in built, wild and cultivated spaces, which are influenced by socio-cultural, political environments and ecosystems in which they are embedded. This insinuates that the food environment plays a vital role in ensuring (un)healthy diets for individuals. The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of the built food environment (FE) on individual food choices and socio-cultural food practices in Nairobi, Kenya. We used a mixed-method approach to better understand the drivers of food choices. We assessed the food environment using vendor mapping and a photovoice approach to assess individuals' dietary choices. We conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-four individuals in three income regions: Kilimani/Kileleshwa, Viwandani and Kasarani. 3458 food vendors and outlets were mapped within these three settlements. We estimated the distribution of food vendors within each settlement in correspondence to where consumers buy from. From the participants' photos, we found that how individuals interacted with their food environment was influenced by their income, convenience, time, health and family food preferences. Physical food access, availability and safety were other influencing factors. Our research findings suggest transformative solutions such as promotion of healthy diets, and affordable food prices for staples, fruits and vegetables among all population backgrounds. Also, interventions should increase physical access to culturally appropriate, nutritious and healthy diets, to promote better nutrition practices.

Keywords: Dietary choices, food environment, photovoice, socio-cultural food practices