

Social Change, New Food Habits and Food Price Volatility in Burkina Faso

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Abstract Food price volatility is at the core of many changes in people's livelihoods. Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world, and as such its population is hard hit by fluctuations in food prices. During our research in Kaya and Nessesmentenga, northeast Burkina Faso, we found that in recent years people's food habits and way of life have changed. Notably, we observed an increase in the consumption of foods outside the home, which we see as a change in cultural habits resulting from the recurring increase in the price of basic goods.

1 Introduction

In 2008, rapid increases in the prices of basic commodities triggered food riots in Burkina Faso's main towns and cities. The price rises also led to substantial changes in people's food habits and ways of life. As part of the Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility project, between 2012 and 2014, the Department of Socio-Economics and Anthropology of Development at the Institut des Sciences des Sociétés conducted three rounds of research in the central and northern areas of the country. In our study area we observed how food habits have been changing and we asked how these changes were linked to rising and volatile food prices and what the implications were. In particular, we noted the growing use of processed foods. We found that food price volatility reinforces a growing family dislocation between those who work and eat at home and those who work and eat away from home. In this article we show how particular changes in food habits can be seen as adaptation strategies linked to price volatility and we demonstrate that these changes are also leading to changes in social patterns and attitudes.

This article is based on primary research undertaken at the two sites in Sanmatenga Province, where poverty has increased significantly in recent years (between 2003 and 2006 the population living below the poverty line in the province increased from 34 per cent to 43 per cent (INSD 2010)). Kaya, 100km northeast of Ouagadougou, is the provincial capital and has a population of 54,365. Like many medium-sized towns in Burkina Faso, Kaya looks like a large village that has become increasingly urbanised over the years. A significant

segment of the population is still engaged in farming and livestock, while the town is also home to public and private employees and a growing informal sector. The second site is Nessesmentenga village, with a population of 4,355, some 10km from Kaya. Most inhabitants are farmers and a few are artisans, blacksmiths and traders, of whom many are itinerant. We visited each site annually between 2012 and 2014, conducting interviews with community leaders, civil society members, administrative officials and householders, and also facilitated focus group discussions with specific groups such as young farmers and market traders.

2 Context: the volatility of food prices in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, the agricultural sector contributes at least 30 per cent of GDP (MASA 2013), yet it is largely un-modernised and has little protection from the vagaries of climate. Today, production of cereals (maize, sorghum, millet, rice and fonio) is inadequate to ensure food self-sufficiency. Thus, the country is acutely affected by the international volatility of food prices. A World Bank study in 2015 showed that domestic hindrances created by poor roads and high transport costs from surplus to deficit areas within the country also created significant fluctuations in prices in both source and receiving markets (Moctar, Maitre d'Hôtel and Le Cotty 2015).

Between 1990 and 2007, the state and its technical and financial partners had largely managed to mitigate the phenomenon of food insecurity. But in 2008, when global food prices spiked, local prices also rose and violent street demonstrations broke out

in the largest towns of Burkina Faso as a direct result of soaring cereal prices. The Société Nationale de Gestion du Stock Alimentaire (SONAGESS) monitors fluctuations in food prices and agricultural markets through its national market information system, a comprehensive process of data collection, transmission, processing, analysis and dissemination. In 2008 and 2011, this enabled the state to take relatively quick action regarding the price of a number of staple foods (Tiendrebéogo 2011).

Prices in markets like those at Kaya and Nessesmentenga were also affected by the activities of local traders. Our research found that speculators in both sites added to food price volatility by stockpiling food and creating artificial shortages in order to sell at a higher price during the lean period. In an attempt to mitigate the effects of this behaviour, SONAGESS, with the backing of the Burkina Faso Consumers League, opened *'boutiques témoin'*, where food is sold at 'social prices' to vulnerable people. For instance, a 100kg bag of white sorghum, the most consumed cereal, is sold for CFA11,500 (US\$25) while it costs CFA25,000 (US\$55) on local markets. To prevent speculative traders from buying up the grain from the *boutiques témoin*, the League uses local organisations to reach disadvantaged people. This system, which enables more poor people to buy food at a reasonable price, has proved its efficiency to date.

3 Impact of rising food prices at household level

In the town of Kaya, the informal sector, based on craftsmanship and trading, is expanding, the public administration and the army in the town are being severely cut back, while many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have established offices in the town. Many workers are spending extra hours at their workplaces, trying to earn more money. Personal financial gain is on the rise.

Many young people from Kaya are getting involved in the nearby gold mines, in spite of the many risks associated with this activity. This has picked up momentum in the aftermath of the food crisis of 2008, not least because many are struggling to meet their basic food needs. The gold mines also attract women who go there to sell water and processed foods. A 44-year-old municipal employee¹ from Kaya explained that:

Men let their wives go to gold-mining sites. Members of Moga communities do not usually want their women to go to these sites. Now, many women go to gold-mining sites, they have become rich and made it their main activity.

In Nessesmentenga, many young men have become itinerant traders, commuting to the neighbouring towns of Kaya, Boussouma and Korsimoro. They leave their village in the morning and come back late in the evening. Outside periods of agricultural work, some are engaged in seasonal work in town as watchmen, labourers on construction sites and other day jobs, while others, like their counterparts from Kaya town, go in increasing numbers to work in the gold mines. Women also go to the mines to sell water or sieve aggregates for money. Contrary to the cultural traditions of the past, they have stopped waiting for their husbands to provide. Sometimes, young men who have gone to look for gold leave their wives to source food for the family for several days at a time.

4 How people are eating now

In their search for decent sustenance, young people also come back with new ways of eating which in turn modify their environment. The market of Nessesmentenga, which used to come to life only every three days, now has two popular restaurants open every day (even if they are more lively on market days), a videoclub and a convenience store. Previously, our respondents told us, most people would work in or near their house and eat at home. As prices rose and the economy tightened, many people had to leave the village and look for all kinds of work, in towns, in the mines or as travelling traders, in order to meet their needs. As a result, they found themselves eating in a different way, at roadside stalls and restaurants, rather than eating at home together with the family. Even those public sector workers who used to come home for a two-hour lunch at midday stopped the practice.

These new eating habits have enabled some to save time when they go about their work and others to reduce the heavy costs of family cooking. While such a change in food habits constitutes a coping strategy in a context of rising food prices, it also has the effect of exposing people to the volatility of processed and street foods, which is more difficult for the government to control, as well as exposing them to risky and often low-quality foods.

In Kaya, informal workers take their meals at their workplace or nearby in order to save time and to reduce the amount of money they spend on food. There are popular restaurants and coffee kiosks at every corner and eateries can get very busy, especially around midday. The dishes offered are diverse and include rice, pasta, couscous or cowpeas. Women use trolleys to carry around processed

and ready-made foods. Meals are more and more individualised. People choose the dish they want according to their means and taste. This social change means that those working outside their home become more dependent on food purchased outside of the family context. Now they are victims of the volatility of food prices in a new way, when those who make processed and street foods have to reduce portions and lower quality. The food sellers, under pressure, look for the cheapest ingredients so that they can increase their profit margins. This leads some of them to use products of dubious quality (adulterated oils, out-of-date pasta or couscous) when preparing food. Thus, in a context of food price volatility, not only are customers changing their eating habits and exposing themselves to risk, but so are the sellers.

These behaviours have gathered momentum since the 2008 food crisis. These days, according to Mr Z., a 44-year-old retired municipal officer² in Kaya, ‘Most people have their meals outside because this is a commercial town, more and more people are doing trading, it keeps them busy and makes them stay outside for most of the day’. Men who often eat in town when at work are now not afraid to ask for their wives’ financial contribution to the household budget. In this situation, household heads who ‘have to’ have their meals outside, leave enough money for the family members who stay at home to eat. But women left at home often complain that they do not leave enough money for a decent meal. They have to use their ingenuity to both improve the taste of food (using Maggi stock cubes, for example) and reduce the costs incurred by family cooking. People tell us that they eat together as a family less often now. Instead, they prefer to buy processed, cheaper street food. Most of the time, the only shared family meal is supper, usually *tô* (a meal made of millet or maize) served with varying sauces, according to the season and the household income.

In Nessesmentenga, a new phenomenon has developed in the last five years: processed foods are being sold on non-market days and young men are the main consumers. Yet, according to the traditional practices followed in the village, one should not have a meal outside of the family unit. During periods of agricultural work, women used to bring lunch meals to the fields so that the whole family could eat together, and in the evening, meals were eaten at home. In the recent past, eating out was not seen as culturally acceptable beyond a few items such as groundnuts, cakes, doughnuts and grilled meat. Today, many young people go to the two local

restaurants twice a day. Some have their breakfast there on their way to work, while others go there at any time of the day if they can afford it. ‘There is the fact that it’s a meal which is automatically available; if you are hungry at home and dinner is not ready, you can just go to the restaurant where a meal is ready for you’, says Mr S., a 38-year-old farmer³ in Nessesmentenga. The opening of the two seven-days-a-week restaurants satisfies the consumers’ demand.

Many households with a low income, meanwhile, are skipping lunch to reduce food expenditure. Just like in Kaya, nowadays *tô* is made only for the evening meal. During the day, some women buy meals from the restaurants for their children, as increasing demands on their labour often mean that they do not have time to cook. Such behaviours were not culturally acceptable in rural areas before, where a woman was not supposed to be engaged in paid work. At home when they do cook, they also have to be imaginative to create the evening meal, for men who eat outside get used to varied, tasty dishes and have little appreciation for the quality of home-cooked meals. Some young men don’t even share the sole evening meal with their family. They eat in town before coming back home. Yet it is more and more difficult for women to cook well at home because of the rising cost of ingredients and especially of firewood: they cannot get away with taking it from the wild any more as the government is getting tougher. They cannot use butane because the cost per bottle is so high and it is hard to access in rural areas. They constantly try to solve the supply–demand problem linked to their cooking or buying according to what they can afford and what is available.

Young married men, who eat outside because they come back home late in the evening, also contribute in reducing the household food budget for their individual benefit. Women have to think about what they can do to improve their budget: whether it is small-scale trade, selling water on mining sites, or taking on cleaning jobs in neighbouring towns; they no longer ‘sit at home’ (a popular expression in Burkina). Social change, in a context of volatility of food prices, leads people to let go of certain values and cultural practices around food. Looking for renewed means of income in order to feed oneself with dignity has become the first priority.

5 Implications

In Burkina Faso, food prices are crucial for low-income consumers. The consumers we met showed that they are pragmatic in their constant adaptation

to the realities of the day. Writing about eating habits in sub-Saharan Africa, Georges Courade argued that eating is part of a wider social context, in that it reflects a culture as well as an economic reality (1989: 22). He explained that food habits are the result of inherited tastes, identities and culinary concepts, but are also often constrained by a range of exogenous factors such as accessibility, prices or level of income. In a context of volatility of food prices, and an increasing need for income in an economy in which subsistence crop production is beginning to lose its dominance, the consumption of processed foods outside the household grows. This phenomenon is significant in urban or semi-urban areas and is emerging in rural areas, where some young people have enough money to buy their own meals.

As the sociologist Guy Rocher states, social change can be defined as 'any change which can be observed over time and which affects in a durable way the structure or functioning of a certain community's social organisation and modifies the course of history' (1968: 22). In Burkina Faso, social change is accelerated by food price volatility, which makes people look for new social and economic activities and modifies their eating behaviours. This leads to modified cultural attitudes and value systems (Moscovici 1988; De Sardan 2008).

Recent scandals in the media regarding the use of adulterated products in street foods (Nassa 2006) have highlighted that the move towards the consumption of foods outside of the home exposes consumers to new food risks. Furthermore, while cereals and other basic foodstuffs can be subject to state price controls, the fluctuation in the prices of processed foods cannot be controlled by the public authorities, since the trade sector in Burkina is governed by the principle of the free market. Trade regulation instruments, such as the Common External Tariff (CET) currently promote the opening of WAEMU (West African Economic and Monetary Union), to which Burkina is a party, to the global economy. This increases the diversity, but not necessarily the quality of processed foods

through the import of industrial foods such as couscous, pasta, flavourings and cheap rice. These are integrated into local food markets. Most often, the ingredients used in the preparation of dishes sold in popular restaurants are imported. Yet public policies control neither the quality of these foods, nor regulate their prices. The populations of Kaya and Nessesmentenga are thus at the mercy of tough market conditions.

New eating habits emerging in this context erode cultural foundations such as family cohesion and informal education. A meal eaten together was indeed a space of education and socialisation. It was an opportunity to teach the younger generation the fundamental values underpinning culture. It was an occasion to celebrate values such as respect, solidarity and humility. But these days, even in rural areas where only the evening meal is still shared, some family members are missing around the table, due to the new eating habits. The individualisation of the eating patterns leads to a decrease in the value of solidarity. New activities emerge, such as women working outside of the village in order to earn money for the food budget. In this context, women have stepped in to provide for themselves and their families. Some of them have had to develop all kinds of initiatives in order to provide for their families. Mrs S., a 50-year-old secretary⁴ in Kaya related her personal story of having to engage in a range of activities in order to look after her household: 'If you're healthy, you must fight to feed yourself. If you're a public servant, a labourer, you have to fight, unless you're lazy. Even when I'm unwell, I cook cakes to sell them. I also raise sheep.'

The promotion of food security in Burkina Faso has to involve subtle adjustments between local and international conditions, respecting the original mechanisms created by local populations in order to adapt to food price volatility. While many of the social changes that have occurred in the past few years are irreversible, it is important to sustain these initiatives and adaptation mechanisms through bottom-up multisectoral policies.

Notes

- 1 Interview, 17 October 2012, Kaya.
- 2 Interview, 15 September 2012, Kaya.
- 3 Interview, 29 September 2014, Nessesmentenga.
- 4 Interview, 13 September 2012, Kaya.

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