

Eat With Us: Insight into Household Food Habits in a Time of Food Price Volatility in Zambian Communities

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Abstract Dramatic food price rises in Zambia followed the global food price crisis of 2008 and caused long-term damage to the lives and livelihoods of many low-income families. This article provides a view on what food was and is now on people's tables and explains how sudden increases in the price of food and other essentials has in some cases permanently altered what people eat, despite subsequent falls in prices. This article traces how change to what people can put on the table affects both individual and community wellbeing in terms of nutrition, taste and food heritage.

1 Introduction

Around March 2009, the effects of the global financial crisis, which started in 2008, were felt by ordinary Zambians through an increase in prices of essential food items. The adverse impacts of the crisis were felt strongly during the third quarter of 2009, creating negative effects in the economy, in trade, mining and tourism, and leading to scaled down investment and production. This in turn led to rising interest rates, depreciation of the kwacha against the major currencies, inflation, falling stock market prices and considerable job losses, particularly in the mining sector (Ndulo *et al.* 2010).

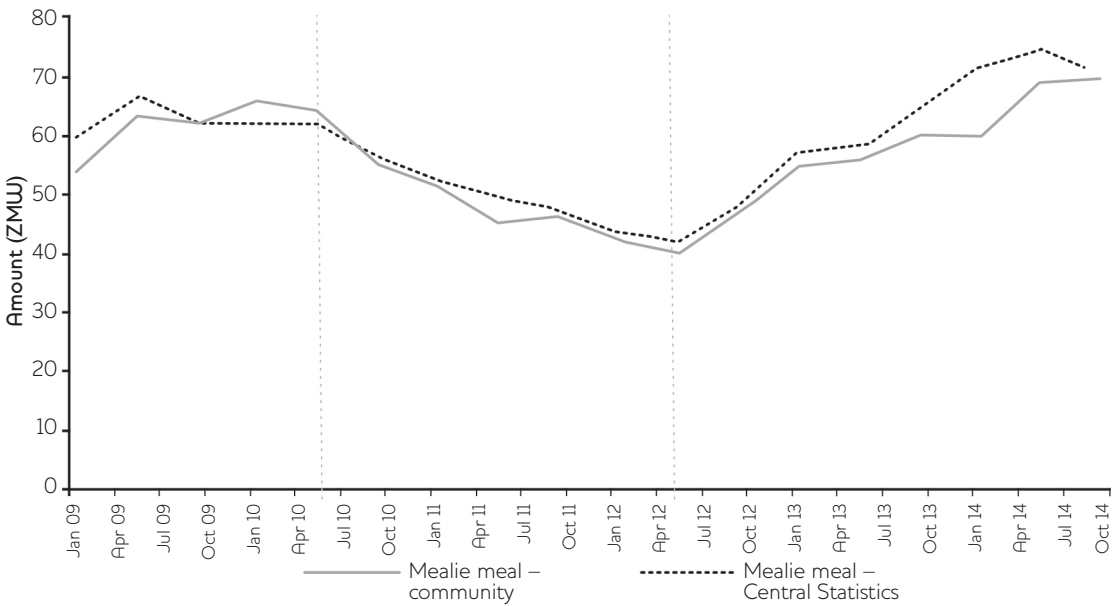
At micro level, a pilot study to the Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility project conducted between 2009 and 2011 as part of the Social Impacts of Crisis research, a qualitative study looking at the impacts of the food, fuel and financial crises in six countries, including Zambia¹ revealed that the global crises had almost immediate effects on people's livelihoods, food security and general wellbeing (Hossain *et al.* 2009). Overall, the price volatility threatened Zambia's economic and social growth, risking a reversal of the gains made in the years before the crisis (Ndulo *et al.* 2010). Now, after six years of research in Zambia on the impact of food price volatility on the lives of people on low incomes, most recently as part of the Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility study, we can connect the effects of price volatility over time with the way people eat now.

This article focuses on how the meals that people have been eating in low-income communities have changed over the six-year period from 2009 to 2014. Though food consumption is often presented quantitatively and in large aggregates, this article provides a qualitative view of food consumption as assessed by those who eat around each table. It is important for us to reflect the different qualitative dimensions and characteristics of food consumption according to people's own perceptions, so as to demonstrate the vivid effects of food price volatility and the irreversible change it can make to the general wellbeing of households and individuals. While there are many ways food price crises affect household and individual wellbeing, this article concentrates on the concrete reality of food security: having food of sufficient quality and quantity in a socially and culturally acceptable manner, and having good health and nutrition (World Bank 2006).

This article uses data collected through the repeated visits to two research sites in Zambia, one urban, Kabwata, and one rural, Chikwanda. In each site we conducted household as well as key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

Kabwata community is located in Lusaka, Zambia's capital city. It is a medium to densely populated residential area with a population of about 46,000 people, the majority of whom are young or middle-aged. Almost half of the households are

Figure 1 Price of retail staple food (Breakfast Mealie Meal 25kg bag), Lusaka, 2009–14



Source Author's own calculations of data from Central Statistical Office (CSO) monthly bulletins and interviews with community members.

female-headed and these generally have the lowest incomes. The area is also home to civil servants and other salaried people and traders, and retired, retrenched and unemployed people. The majority of households are employed in the informal sector with a significant number involved in petty trading.

Chikwanda community is located in Mpika District in Northern Zambia. The village lies 12km north of the district town of Mpika and has a population of 18,425, also majority youth and middle-aged. Chikwanda supplies 40 per cent of Mpika town's consumption of crops and vegetables. Mpika District is at a confluence of two major trunk roads connecting Zambia to two border points with Tanzania. The district town is a transport hub and business trading area for cross-border traders. The vast majority of people in Chikwanda earn their livelihoods through agriculture and vegetable production, while a few are engaged in menial labour, making handicrafts or collecting and processing minor forest products. Those involved in agriculture production grow mostly maize, along with groundnuts, sweet potatoes, cassava, beans and soya beans. Production levels depend on availability of fertilisers, pesticides and rainfall.

2 Food price volatility in Zambia, 2009–14

Food prices have been volatile in Zambia since the first price spike of 2008/09. The data in Figure 1

shows a trend of the price of mealie meal (processed maize), between 2009 and 2014.

The data are represented across three distinct periods. The first period saw an increase in the price of 25kg of mealie meal from ZMW45.26 in May 2008 to ZMW66.97 (FAO 2015) in May 2009 in response to the global price spike. The price then remained steadily high until May 2010. According to Ndulo *et al.* (2010), during this period the government failed to protect people from the effects of the food prices, as accompanying fiscal effects reduced government expenditure on the social sectors and poverty reduction. Just before the crisis, the government had started to devise a social protection system for the country, which stalled due to the global financial crisis.

The second period was on account of the easing out of the effects of the global financial crisis and occurred between May 2010 and May 2012. During this period the price of 25kg of mealie meal declined from ZMW61.9 in May 2010 to ZMW42 in May 2012, unaffected by the second global food price rises that occurred in 2011/12. With this decline in the price of staples, it might have been expected that households would return to prior levels of food consumption. However, the majority of households on low incomes in our study sites failed to return to earlier patterns of food spending and consumption.

Householders explained that while food prices fell, wages were stagnant and the cost of farming inputs such as fertiliser increased, leaving less money to spend on food. Further, the government was slow in committing resources to social protection and poverty reduction programmes, but focused all effort to recover the economy by reviving the mining industry.

The third period showed an increase in the price of a 25kg bag of mealie meal from a low of ZMW42 in May 2012 to a new high of ZMW71 in May 2014, even though by this time global prices were falling rapidly. In Zambia, prices were affected by the removal of food and fuel subsidies. The government introduced the miller–consumer subsidy in 2011 to lower staple consumer prices and raise producer prices. In a comparable way the fuel subsidy was put in place in 2007 to cushion the impact of increased oil prices. Both subsidies were abolished in May 2013, at a time when the price of mealie meal had already begun to spike again (see Figure 1), with the justification that the expenditure on the subsidy was too great a drain on the country’s resources. Despite the awareness of the possible negative impact the removal of the subsidy would have on low-income consumers, the government preferred to utilise the saved funds in the health and education sectors. With the removal of the miller–consumer subsidy, households lost savings averaging 19 per cent (CUTS 2014) and, in the absence of alternative social programmes, many households slid into food insecurity. The number of people estimated to be at risk of food insecurity rose from about 63,000 in 2012 to about 351,267 in 2014 (Zambia VAC 2014).

3 What has changed about the food on the table

Maize is the preferred and most consumed staple in Kabwata and Chikwanda. It is processed into mealie meal and cooked as *nshima*, a stiff porridge. *Nshima* is generally regarded as central to the diet and wellbeing, especially among rural households, who believe that *nshima* makes the main meal. Traditionally, *nshima* is eaten with vegetables like *rape* (collard greens) and cabbage. Other foods accompanying *nshima* include *kapenta* (tiny sardines), fish (usually bream), beans, chicken and meat such as beef and pork.

Before the initial spike in food prices, a big plate of *nshima* was on the table at lunch and dinner in both Kabwata and Chikwanda. In addition to the two daily *nshima* meals, households with higher incomes in the urban community would eat breakfast in the morning of tea with bread, while households on low incomes ate maize grit or porridge made

from mealie meal. In Chikwanda, lunch and dinner would be eaten during and after the harvest season, between April and October when the food stock was high. During the lean months between November and March non-poor households were able to afford to eat *nshima* twice per day but in smaller quantities, while less well-off households ate one meal per day.

After the 2008/09 spike in food prices, food on the table changed visibly and since then, has not returned to what it was. While all the households with whom we have been talking over the study period still prefer *nshima*, the number of *nshima* meals and the amount on the table has been reducing. Only a few households who have a high income indicate that they are consuming as much and as good food as they did in the period before the spike in food prices. In September 2014, out of ten households visited in Kabwata, only three were consuming food close to the quality consumed previously, while the rest felt that what they are eating now is far from ideal. The low-income households have been stretching the food, eating *nshima* with smaller portions of other foods. Instead of cooking one side dish of vegetables, fish or meat and serving it for a single day as they had done previously, poor households are now cooking a side dish and serving it beyond two days. In the most vulnerable households people are eating *nshima* without any side dish and are skipping meals.

Quantitative analysis of household budget shares in Zambia shows that households respond to food price increase by reducing animal proteins such as beef, chicken and fish or choosing poorer quality substitutes (Chibuye 2014). Even with the staple food, households can be seen to switch to cheaper, lower quality mealie meal. For instance, between 2006 and 2010, households drastically reduced the consumption of white breakfast mealie meal by an average of 32kg, i.e. by 53 per cent (Chibuye 2014). In urban Kabwata, we find that non-poor households have been reducing the quantity of mealie meal they eat and have begun to eat other staples such as domestically produced rice, which is considered to be of poor quality and therefore sold at a discount compared to imported rice. For people on low incomes the quality of what they are eating has also deteriorated over time.

Many of the poorer families in Chikwanda spoke about eating less preferred foods and foraging for wild foods. For instance, in the place of cabbage or *rape*, they gather *bondive*, a wild vegetable which grows near rubbish pits. Further, low-income

Figure 2 Comparison of food items over a period of one year – urban site



February 2008

Items include: 1kg bag of mealie meal, three tomatoes, two onions, 50ml cooking oil, 25g sugar, 50g *kapenta* and two bundles of vegetables.



February 2009

Items include: 1kg bag of mealie meal, two tomatoes, two onions, 25g sugar, 50ml cooking oil and one bundle of vegetables.

Source Photographs by Muwila Mulumbi.

households who cannot afford *kapenta* choose instead to eat an inferior and less tasty type called *daaga*. They also explained that the way it is processed leaves a lot of sand particles and it is sometimes contaminated by rodent droppings. Despite a ban on *daaga* by the government as a measure to protect consumers, the market is now flooded with it due to the high price of *kapenta*. Everyone that we met who was eating *daaga* was worried about it. They described symptoms in those who frequently ate *daaga* that included skin rashes, ringworm, diarrhoea and loss of hair. According to the health personnel at the clinic that serves Chikwanda, the number of people visiting the clinic with these symptoms has been increasing since 2013.

3.1 The time of the first price spike

Following the price spike in 2008 in rural Chikwanda, low-income households responded by selling productive assets such as farming equipment and took children out of school to work in other farms in return for food or cash. Households were rationing their food by having one meal of *nshima* per day supplemented by vegetables and occasionally by beans or *kapenta*. In the households with better income, instead of finding *nshima* with plates full of foods such as fish, beans and *kapenta*, the quantity of food, particularly of the animal proteins, had reduced. The chief of Chikwanda had observed that ‘access to good and sufficient quantities of food is the biggest problem that everyone is now focused on’.

In urban Kabwata, both low- and high-income households initially responded to the food crisis by adjusting their household budget in a way that would help them maintain their previous consumption patterns. A few among the low-income households borrowed money from friends and money lenders to maintain their way of eating as well as meet other costs for education, housing and transport. To illustrate how the spending on food changed what was on the table, women taking part in the study collected up a basket of essential food items amounting to ZMW5 (US\$1) and arranged them according to what they could buy from the amount before and after the food price spike, illustrated in Figure 2. With stagnant incomes, low-income households could no longer afford to buy the same quantity of mealie meal, vegetables, tomatoes and cooking oil and often could not afford fish at all.

3.2 The time of lower food prices

When the price of the staple food went down, the food on the table, instead of improving again, remained as it was in the period of the spike. The majority of the households failed to readjust their diet because they were still replacing lost assets and spending more on house rent, schooling and other rising costs. The most affected households were those whose food consumption fell below adequate levels in the previous period and who had no access to either formal or informal social protection. In Chikwanda this included casual wage labourers and subsistence farmers. Even households with access to social protection mechanisms provided

by the government or the churches such as the Farmer Input Support Programme (FISP) or school bursaries said they were only helpful for getting by rather than for establishing long-term coping strategies. In 2010, in the initial rounds of the research, a male farmer² in Chikwanda explained:

Our lives are going backwards, instead of increasing the bags of fertiliser and maize seed [through FISP] to help us attain food security and generate income to help us tackle our poverty, the government is leading us further into hunger and poverty.

The better-off farming households did not perform particularly well during this period either, due to the low floor price of maize set by the government. With an uncertain market price, they felt unable to make investments. In Kabwata there was also uncertainty; people working in the informal sector explained that wages had stayed low and expenses had gone up, so while the lower price of food was a relief, the food on the table remained poor and dull as illustrated here. This was detailed by a male petty trader³ in Kabwata in 2010:

Though things should have improved by now, our businesses have failed to recover and there are times when a week would go by without getting a customer. During this time, everyone in the house feels the pressure. Children start asking questions such as 'why are we eating beans everyday?' But they know they do not have a choice.

Households with low incomes in Kabwata were struggling to repay the debts they had incurred in 2009 after the initial food price crisis and whatever little extra income they generated in the period, failed to help them recover. In 2011, a female vegetable trader⁴ from Kabwata went further and explained:

We have been generating very little profit from the sale of vegetables. [...] We use what should be ploughed back in the business to feed our families and this means we have to constantly borrow money to re-invest in the business and whenever we make any decent profit, we use that to pay back the debts. This has become a vicious cycle for some time now and it's really hard to get out of it.

3.3 The time of the second price spike

Following the period of low prices, the price of mealie meal and other essential foodstuffs began to increase in 2012 and spiked after the removal of the consumer–miller subsidy. As a direct impact of this, food once again dominated the household budget among almost all the 20 households we visited in Kabwata and Chikwanda in 2014, reaching as much as 60 per cent in some houses. The staple food was

taking up 30–45 per cent of expenditure on food for low-income households.

In urban Kabwata, it was explained that higher food prices were eroding the financial savings of better-off households and this has forced them into a situation where they are now beginning to live hand-to-mouth. While they have assets which they can sell off when times get tough, they prefer not to, despite the high cost of living, children in schools and houses to pay rent for. With a tight budget, the households were buying food from cheaper sources and compromising the quality of the food on the table. On the other hand, families with low and precarious incomes in Kabwata said they were eating less regularly and less well. The quantity of food consumed in the previous period was already low and this had now halved. From eating smaller quantities and fewer meals, the households were now eating poorer quality and less preferred foods. Mr B., a 40-year old car trader,⁵ participant in a focus group discussion with men in Kabwata in 2014 lamented: 'Gone are the days when we used to fill our plates with good food. Eating meat is now a luxury because it has become very expensive.'

In Chikwanda, the higher prices of maize in this period might have been expected to be good news for farmers, but this has not been the case. Poor farmers did not have means of raising investment capital to sustain crop production. They produced less and bought more food. Some households during the fieldwork in 2014 reported that they were going for almost six months without eating animal protein due to the high price, while others ate the unsafe *daaga*. Instead, most ate foods like beans and seasonal crops such as groundnuts with *nshima*. When faced with desperation, they explained that they eventually went into the bush to gather whatever they could find, whether it tasted good or not, whether it was nutritious or not. Ms M., a single mother⁶ from Chikwanda explained:

We eat anything as long as we are not going hungry. We now expect food prices to change every year and every year we know that we will have to adjust either the quantity of what we eat or the quality. This year we have adjusted the quality of what we are eating

A male vegetable producer⁷ in Chikwanda went further:

Even though some of us still eat two meals, the food is not really that good. We just maintain the number of meals but really the quality of food has changed. For example, we used to eat the tasty beans called 'Kabulankezi' but we now eat the tasteless 'Solwezi' because it is cheaper than the other one.

4 Implications

The price spikes in Chikwanda and Kabwata had lasting effects, especially among those on low and precarious incomes. The volatility of food prices, operating at the same time as cost of living is rising, poses a challenge. It is therefore of vital importance to address the short-term effects of food price volatility immediately after a price shock, including the first effects of hunger and the household's ability to purchase a variety of food, to help families avoid having to make negative adjustments. The long-lasting effects and irreversible changes described in this article point to the necessity of mitigation measures that cushion the effects of food price increase on poor households. The measures taken by government to mitigate the effects of the 2008/09 price crisis dealt with the effects on the economy and not the effects on households; this, to a large degree, is what caused the food on the tables of low-income families to fail to come back to normal when prices of food later dropped in 2010 and 2011.

The medium-term effects of such shock, which include not only food and nutrition insecurity, but also ill-health and stress, can be resolved by promoting both local mechanisms of informal social protection such as access to agriculture labour opportunities and formal access to farmer input support programmes, social cash transfers in favour of people living in poverty and establishment of subsidies such as the miller–consumer subsidy and the fuel subsidy. These kinds of measure would need to be negotiated and articulated with the active involvement of government, civil society organisations, farmers, consumers and market intermediaries.

The long-term effects of food price volatility have implications at a wider scale. When large numbers of individual households make adjustments to reduce the quality and quantity of their food, it

affects not only their own health and ability to make a living, but the productivity of the whole community. To mitigate long-term effects, both consumers and producers should be supported. For instance, small-scale farmers need the ability to re-invest in agricultural production or other production backed by technical, financial and institutional support. Urban workers need more secure wages and more opportunities for work. Policies should promote social and economic measures that accommodate the sense of income security of both producers and consumers. The leading role has to be played by government authorities, while the private-sector production organisations, civil society organisations, together with associations of consumers, must play an active and supportive role in the design and implementations of these policies.

Finally, the implication of food price volatility on both individual and community wellbeing in terms of food heritage is important to also reflect on. Zambian food is a culture and way of living and it provides a community a sense of identity and security. Before the initial food price spike, people were able to determine with ease the type of food produced or bought, what went into the cooking pot and what ultimately was set on the table. However, food price volatility has challenged these customs and food habits. This has come at a great cost to vulnerable household members, particularly children, who will grow up seeing the current status quo of food habits as the new normal. While the qualitative studies undertaken in the two communities over the past six years have highlighted and recommended aspects to respect the right to food, food consumption assessments need to go beyond this and should include aspects that boldly uphold and protect the food heritage of people in ways that will help to restore the dignity, sense of identity and security that people have lost.

Notes

1 As part of the Social Impacts of Crisis research, 2009–11, funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) and Oxfam GB, one rural and one urban location were selected as 'listening posts' in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Yemen and Zambia. For more details see project page: www.ids.ac.uk/project/the-social-impacts-of-crisis.

- 2 Interview, 4 March 2010.
- 3 Interview, 26 February 2010.
- 4 Interview, 18 February 2011.
- 5 Interview, 13 September 2014.
- 6 Interview, 24 September 2014.
- 7 Interview, 27 September 2014.

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