

Food Habits and Food Security

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07/04/2006

Every society has food menus of its own depending on the prevailing culture of food production and/or acquisition. The types of plants and animals, which serve as sources of food are dependent on the climatic conditions or generally, the ecosystem characteristics of an area and the traditions of selection of crop and animal types. The latter could depend on religious prescriptions and taboos of obscure origin. Atmospheric temperature conditions of the locality and the nature of the activities people are engaged in also determine the calorie needs of the people. Once the types of food are selected in a gradual adaptation process they become established as staple diets of a particular society. The dietary culture will happily prevail as long as the biophysical, economic and social factors from which the food culture emerged remain without significant change. If significant changes occur in one or more of these factors change in the dietary habits is expected. However, 'habits die hard'; so do food habits. Food habits tend to outlive the original natural and cultural factors, which were responsible for the establishment of the food habits.

There are good examples of this situation in Ethiopia. In Tigray, long after much of the land area ceased to be suitable for growing "teff", a huge quantity of the cereal is being purchased from near and distant regions. The people, particularly the urban residents have become unable to get used to other kinds of food, which could be grown in the region in large enough quantities. Because habit has become 'second nature' as the English saying goes, nothing else is palatable except 'magna' or "sergegna". Unable to snap out of the craving for "teff" the demand has become price inelastic. The price of "teff" has been rising much higher than the total monthly income of a large proportion of the urban residents in many parts of Ethiopia. Unfortunately, habit has been taking its toll and the motto has become "teff-enjera or death!" My MA thesis was on urban food marketing system of one regional capital in Ethiopia. In my thesis, the trend analysis showed that the price of "teff" was going to rise in the future. I saw that there was low price elasticity of demand for "teff". In my recommendation No.7, I wrote the following:

"One of the major reasons why people find it difficult to abandon 'enjera' is because it is used as fork or spoon with which 'wat is eaten'. In the absence of 'enjera' people do not know what to do with the 'wat' served to them however tasty or nutritious it may be. Getting accustomed to the use of spoons and forks is a part of the solution."

A colleague of mine, who read the thesis, liked everything in the thesis except recommendation No.7. He couldn't imagine life without 'teff enjera'. He is only one of the millions of Ethiopians who feel that way. THIS COULD LEAD US TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE PROBLEM OF FOOD INSECURITY WE ARE FACING

IS PARTLY A “SOFTWARE” PROBLEM. BEHAVIORAL CHANGE OR NO BEHAVIORAL CHANGE IN FOOD MATTERS IS EQUALLY, IF NOT MORE, IMPORTANT THAN THE “HARDWARE” PROBLEM OF THE PHYSICAL FOOD UNAVAILABILITY. Food security is attained in at least two alternative ways: producing more food or getting more income for food purchase. With changes to other food stuffs, which could be produced in a much smaller plot of land with lesser amount of water and more nutritious than the cereals could make people more food secure given the shortage of land and water. Shifting to cheaper foodstuffs could help lower income groups to be more food secure. The amount of money spent monthly on the purchase of “teff” and other cereals is so high that thousands of consumers drop out of the market and starve.

You simply have to throw a casual look and compare people who come from the cereal producing northern highlands and those coming from the areas of the “*enset*” -culture in southern Ethiopia. The body weight of the average “*enset*” eating southerner is much higher than the average cereal eating northern highlander. “*Enset*” is a tasty food, though you may have to get used to it. I have got used to it for many years now, and in restaurants I prefer “*kitfo*” with “*Kocho*” (prepared from “*enset*”) rather than with “*enjera*” (a pancake made in most cases of “teff”). Many friends of mine abhor even to think about it. They give all sorts of excuses for not eating *enset*: “...it is buried until it decomposes, etc. etc.”. That is not the real reason though. Their love for “*enjera*” is what has taken better of them. The highest agricultural (rural) population density in Ethiopia is found in the “*enset*” consuming areas of Sidama, Wolaita, Gurageland, and Kembata-Hadiya. The food security situation here is much better than in the less densely populated areas of the north. The same is true to the rice lands of eastern and southern Asia. Rice, similar to *enset*, is an intensive crop, which can yield much higher than the other cereals on a smaller plot of land.

Another food habit, which is detrimental to food security, is the passion for animal flesh. Although it does not form part of the daily menu due to the lack of money for it. People never hesitate to spend a fortune on the purchase of a fat ox or sheep or goat. Even if the price of meat is rising beyond the capability of most salaried employees, let alone the poor, on a Sunday morning you see long queues of people at the butcher shops who are more than happy to spend the last Birr in their pockets for a kilogram of beef. The disdain people have for the otherwise nutritious vegetables is expressed in this Amharic saying: “*Hodin be’ gommen bidelelut, gulbet ke’ daget yelegimal*”. This almost means, eating cabbage does not provide enough energy for walking upslope. People do not think that vegetables are nutritious enough. They are useful only for saving lives. Another Amharic proverb says it all: “*Atikura Gebes gommen bawetaw nefes*”. It means, Barley, you have no reason to be proud of, it is cabbage that saved my life”. Don’t start thinking that this is a rejection of Barley. It is some kind of a ‘loving whip’.

As a strategy to ensure food security farmers all over Ethiopia are engaged in the production of fruits and vegetables using small-scale irrigation. It is an open secret that one of the big problems that farmers are complaining about is the inadequate market for their products. It is not the shortage of people; it is the shortage of demand. The shift of

the dietary habits from the cereals to the vegetables could have helped the irrigating farmers to be more food secure (increased income) as a result of the increased market demand for their products. The low demand for the vegetables produced by the irrigating farmers have forced many of them to shift to the growing of maize and other cereals in irrigated fields. This is not a feasible cropping pattern for smallholder-irrigated farms. Higher value food crops, such as fruits and vegetables, could have been better options, particularly in drought-prone areas.

Another habit that has become detrimental to taking innovative ways to ensure food security is the quantity of food per meal. In most parts of Ethiopia “eating enough” is defined in terms of the total quantity of meal taken. The objective of eating is “filling the belly”. When some people are given, let’s say, a hamburger sandwich they consider it as if it is only for the time being. They expect to have a “proper” meal afterwards. We often hear people saying, “*hod aymolam*”. Mothers would ask their kids, “*hodih moltual?*” With this mentality it is very difficult to produce enough to fill the bellies of the increasing number of people needing food. When we watch movies we are amazed by the size of meal the “*ferenjis*” have on their plates. Many people say, with feeling of deep sympathy, “*yichin bicha beltew liwelu new?*”. Experiences of the nature of the meals served in the developed world, as well as in the most populous nations like India and China show that the principle is: SMALL, BUT NUTRITIOUS. In Ethiopia, the required nutrients, if at all they are there, are obtained from large quantities of food substances. I can safely draw the analogy between the size of meal and the grade of a mineral ore. A high-grade mineral ore means a high proportion of pure mineral out of the total mass of earth and rocks in which the mineral occurs. A “high grade meal” could, therefore, mean high nutrition content per meal. The future direction of technological advance is towards miniaturization. This can also be applied to food. With changes in food habits it is possible to feed more and more people without significantly increasing the size of cultivated land.

Few seem to be listening to what Demeke (the great Ethiopian chef) has to say. He is rightly arguing that, we are hungry not because we lack the food, but we lack the willingness to change our food habits. The ‘software’ approach to ensuring food security is coming as a revolution from the Northern Region of Ethiopia. The people of the Region, particularly those living in the severely drought affected areas, consume the lovely fruit- prickly pear- for snack. Some two or so weeks back many “*teff*”-loving and beef-loving dignitaries were invited to the prickly-pear feast. All of them ate their fill. The realization that all the nutritious dishes were made of prickly pear created an atmosphere of fascination. People must realize that there are several other alternatives to ensuring food security. We are so much tied up by habits or traditions that we unsuccessfully attempt to solve new problems with old methods. Governmental and non-governmental organizations, engaged in ensuring food security, must also pay attention to such other approaches to food security rather than merely counting the number of sacks of wheat needed every time food deficit strikes.

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