

## SOCIAL PARAMETERS UNDERLYING FOOD SHORTAGES IN RURAL HOUSEHOLDS OF BUSIA COUNTY, KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is about demystifying the underlying social factors that explain the paradox of food insecurity in places of plenty. That despite the fact that Busia County is endowed with both natural and human resources for agricultural production and economic development, the County has for several decades been languishing in chronic food insecurity. The paper stems from a research study that questioned what causes the disconnection between the high potential rural environment and the plight of the residents who are living in situations of chronic food insecurity and abject poverty. The specific objective was to examine the social parameters (age, gender, level of education, level of skills and knowledge, decision making at household level, nature of social organization, beliefs, life philosophy, household size, marriage, rites of passage, social authority) that hinder the harnessing of agricultural potential in Busia County. The study was an ethnographic survey in design utilizing purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Use of an interview schedule, in-depth interviews and direct observations were the main methods of data collection. Data was analyzed through both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Social factors were found to explain the low participation in agricultural activities by households that also translated into low own-farm production of food. This article is significant in addressing a practical challenge of chronic food shortage facing residents of Busia County because over 64% of the residents in the County are living below poverty line; with food poverty level of 56%, yet 80% of them earn a living through small scale farming activities. This notwithstanding, there seem to be no scientific explanation on the social aspects contributing to the situation in Busia County: thus, the concern of the paper. This paper will therefore, be of direct benefit to Busia County government and other development partners operating in the county to improve household food security and social-economic development. The information provided here is vital for policy direction, a research database, and for strategic planning by all stakeholders in the County.

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**KEYWORDS:** Social Parameters, Food Shortage, Rural Households, Busia, Kenya

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### INTRODUCTION

Poverty in general and food poverty in particular, continue to dominate development policy agenda in Africa and other developing regions including Kenya. In 2005, 45.6% of Kenyans were poor (KNBS, 2005). Previous percentage of the poor increased to about 52.9% (rural) and 49.2% (urban) in 1997 up from 46% (rural) and 29.3% (urban) in 1992 when the overall poverty was estimated at 56%. In 2014, the 2014 Economic Survey Report showed that nearly 5 out of 10 people in rural areas are poor compared to 3 out of 10 in urban areas. Meanwhile, the agricultural sector, which is the back bone of the Kenyan economy, decelerated in 2013 to 2.9% from a revised growth of 4.2% (KNBS, 2014).

The latest hunger report on the Global Hunger Index ranked Kenya among countries that score poorly in reducing hunger (Ayaga, 2014). Kenya was ranked number 47 out of 76 countries that are struggling to cut hunger among their population and thus, countries whose hidden hunger is classified as serious. In July 2014, the World Food Programme (WFP) report on global food situation indicated that

62% of Kenyans are food insecure, and so the need to mitigate effects of food insecurity (Ibid).

The world food and agriculture through its publication FAO (2012) observed that over half of the developing world's population lives in rural areas: 45% or 3.1 Billion of all the human population. Of them, roughly 2.5 Billion derive their livelihood from agriculture. Agricultural sector is so critical that it is said to be 3.2 times more effective in reducing US2/day poverty than growth in other sectors. Food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain (Food Security Guide, 2011). In its least serious degree, food insecurity indicates only the risk of hunger, not necessarily its presence. By contrast, chronic food insecurity denotes a constant condition of hunger. Food insecurity has remained a national concern for the Kenyan government since independence. Food insecurity is a common phenomenon among residents of rural areas in Kenya, yet they are the main agricultural producers. Thus, the paradox. The main argument in

this report is that the food crisis situation in Kenya is a condition that should not be the case given the high potential and level of resource endowment the Kenyan rural settings have. It is therefore, critical to understand the underlying social and economic factors that derail the country from harnessing the rich agricultural potential for food production and economic growth. This study used the case of Busia County to demonstrate the socio-economic parameters underlying food insecurity in places of plenty in Kenya.

The study is anchored on a practical observation that despite the fact that Busia County is endowed with both natural and human resources for agricultural production and economic development, the County has for several decades been languishing in chronic food insecurity situation. For instance, several poverty reports have declared Busia a food insecure and milk deficit County (GoK, 2008); a County where majority of its residents are low-income earners yet they rely on the market for basic food supplies that they are not able to access regularly (Sorre, 2009; FAO-Kenya, 2010); about 50% of the food consumed in the Country is from Uganda (Sorre, 2003; GoK, 2008); the county has some of the poorest nutrition and health indicators nationwide (NHS, 2010); and Busia is one of the counties with highest level of unemployed population with no factory or processing firm (GoK, 2010). This notwithstanding, the government and non-governmental organizations have been spending millions of shillings on food aid and other humanitarian support in the County that should, in practical terms, not be the case. In contrast, Busia County has some of the best soils and climate for cash and food crop production. For instance, sugarcane from Busia County have double the sucrose used in making commercial sugar compared to sugarcane in Mumias and Kakamega (Sorre, 2005); Busia has optimal potential for dairy farming, cotton, palm, groundnuts, cassava and sweet potatoes, but none has been harnessed into meaningful economic enterprise (MoA, 2009).

The gap here seems to incline towards human and organizational factors rather than the mere physical and environmental challenges present in the County. This explains the question that the study sought to address: what causes the disconnection between the high potential rural environment that is endowed with human and natural resources, and the plight of the residents who are living in situations of chronic food insecurity and abject poverty? The answer to this paradox is to be significant in addressing the problem of food insecurity that has bedeviled the study area and other parts of Kenya with similar experiences; promote local food production practices at Busia County, and save the government and other development agencies millions of shillings used to

provide food aid instead of funding substantive development projects in the County.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2010 estimate by the Food and Agriculture Organization says that 925 million people were undernourished, globally (FAO, 2010). This represents 13.6 percent of the estimated world population of 6.8 billion. In 2011, it was observed that about a billion people experienced the hardship that hunger imposes, a figure which continues to rise even amidst the riches of the 21st century (Food Security Guide, 2011). Engulfed within a vortex of population growth, economic instability and climate change, food insecurity presents a formidable challenge for national and global governance.

The fundamental question by the majority of the global stakeholders in food security is what causes food insecurity? Various scholarly perspectives have emerged in providing answers to this pertinent question. One of these perspectives holds that the world agriculture produces 17 percent more calories per person today than it did 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. This is enough to provide everyone in the world with at least 2,720 kilocalories (kcal) per person per day (FAO, 2002, p.9). The proponents of this dimension view food insecurity as a product of inadequate or improper governance. Another dimension to food insecurity suggests that poverty, in its broadest sense, is the principal cause of hunger (World Bank, 2005). However, this perspective raised several critiques and eventually, another dimension emerged, blaming harmful economic systems as the principal cause of poverty and hunger. These ideas have opened the debate with other views emerging to argue that conflicts causes hunger (UNHCR, 2008); hunger causes poverty that causes hunger. Climate change is another principal cause of hunger (FAO, 2010). All these literature present food insecurity as a multidimensional phenomenon that requires a multifaceted approach to address.

Despite agriculture being the backbone of the Kenyan economy, food insecurity situation in the country is hanging in balance (Barasa, 2010). About a third of Kenya's population are estimated to be food and nutrition insecure, while over 10 million people out of a population of over 42 million in Kenya suffer from chronic food insecurity and poor nutrition; and between two and four million people require emergency food assistance at any given time (Sorre, 2005; Barasa, 2010). Nearly 30% of Kenya's children are classified as undernourished, and micronutrient deficiencies are widespread (GoK, 2008). The growing problem of food and nutrition insecurity in Kenya is linked to the nature of agricultural production (Berg, 1973; Fleuret and Fleuret, 1991; Sorre, 2005), with the main argument being that own

food production is the first pillar for food security. Therefore, investment in agriculture remains critical to sustainable food security. Currently, about 80 percent of Kenya's population live in the rural areas where agriculture dominates (Barasa, 2010). Therefore, a critical focus on individual rural household's food security has a direct implication on the overall national food security status.

According to FAO-Kenya (2007) agricultural production is the lifeline of Busia County's economy. The sub-sector contributes nearly 36% of household income and employs over 81% of the workforce. Most of the food crops consumed in this district are sourced from local production. However, there is a lot which comes from Uganda. This is despite the fact that the quality of maize received from Uganda is poor due to poor post-harvest handling techniques. The report further notes that the land potential in the County is under-utilized as there is plenty of agricultural land lying fallows (pg.107). The concern of this study was to understand why the underutilized land is lying fallow?

Busia County has a high prevalence of absolute poverty. According to the Kenya poverty maps, about two-thirds of the district's residents are unable to meet their basic minimum requirements. At the sub-county level, poverty incidences range from 63% to 74% with Budalang'i, Funyula and Butula divisions registering the highest proportions. The major causes of deprivation are low utilization of agricultural land, inaccessibility to credit and farm inputs, collapse of the cotton industry, lack of organized marketing channels and widespread unemployment due to poorly developed trading and commercial sectors. These were issues of interest to this study.

Food production in Busia County falls below the population demand (Sorre, 2005; FAO-Kenya, 2007). This is despite having a large proportion of land that can be put to agricultural use. Food shortages in the County have been severally attributed to poor agronomic practices such as broadcasting, planting, use of uncertified seeds, and poor attitudes towards traditional crops such as sorghum, among others. The social and economic parameters underlying the poor agronomic practices formed the core of the study. At the household level, most of food needs are met by market purchases particularly in the cash cropping, fisheries and formal employment livelihood zones (Sorre, 2005; Sorre, 2010).

The argument in this report is that it is possible to understand, measure and advice on the underlying

socio-economic factors influencing the individual household food security status in Kenya. While doing so, the report is anchored on the premise that a household's food security status is affected by the social and economic aspects surrounding the household, as well as the community (cultural) and societal (government) opportunities and obstacles. By so doing, this report provides a conceptual and policy direction towards the achievement of the local and overall national food security for rapid economic development in rural Kenya.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The study was guided by an ethnographic survey design where the researcher lived in the study area for a period of one calendar year, 2014, capturing the social activities that households go through as they engage in farming, while also using a questionnaire to gather quantitative data. For the survey component, the target population was smallholder households in Busia County, with the household head being the target for each participating household. A sample size of 500 respondents participated in the study. Proportionate and simple random sampling techniques were employed to select specific households that participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to pick the key informants in the ethnographic component of the study. In terms of data collection, a survey interview using a questionnaire was the main method used. The researcher further employed in-depth interviews and direct observation in gathering qualitative data. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were employed. In quantitative analysis, SPSS computer program, was used to summarize the findings and produces a database that allowed subsequent statistical analysis. Quantitative analysis was mainly at the level of descriptive statistics. In qualitative analysis, content and narrative analyses were used.

The study methodology was guided by a conceptual framework. According to this conceptual framework, the extent to which agricultural potential is harnessed by farmers relies on the complex interaction between the social, economic and governance parameters. However, the extent to which the influence of these parameters may be realized will either be enhanced or hampered by local and external issues. The interaction between the independent, dependent and intervening variables is illustrated in the figure below.

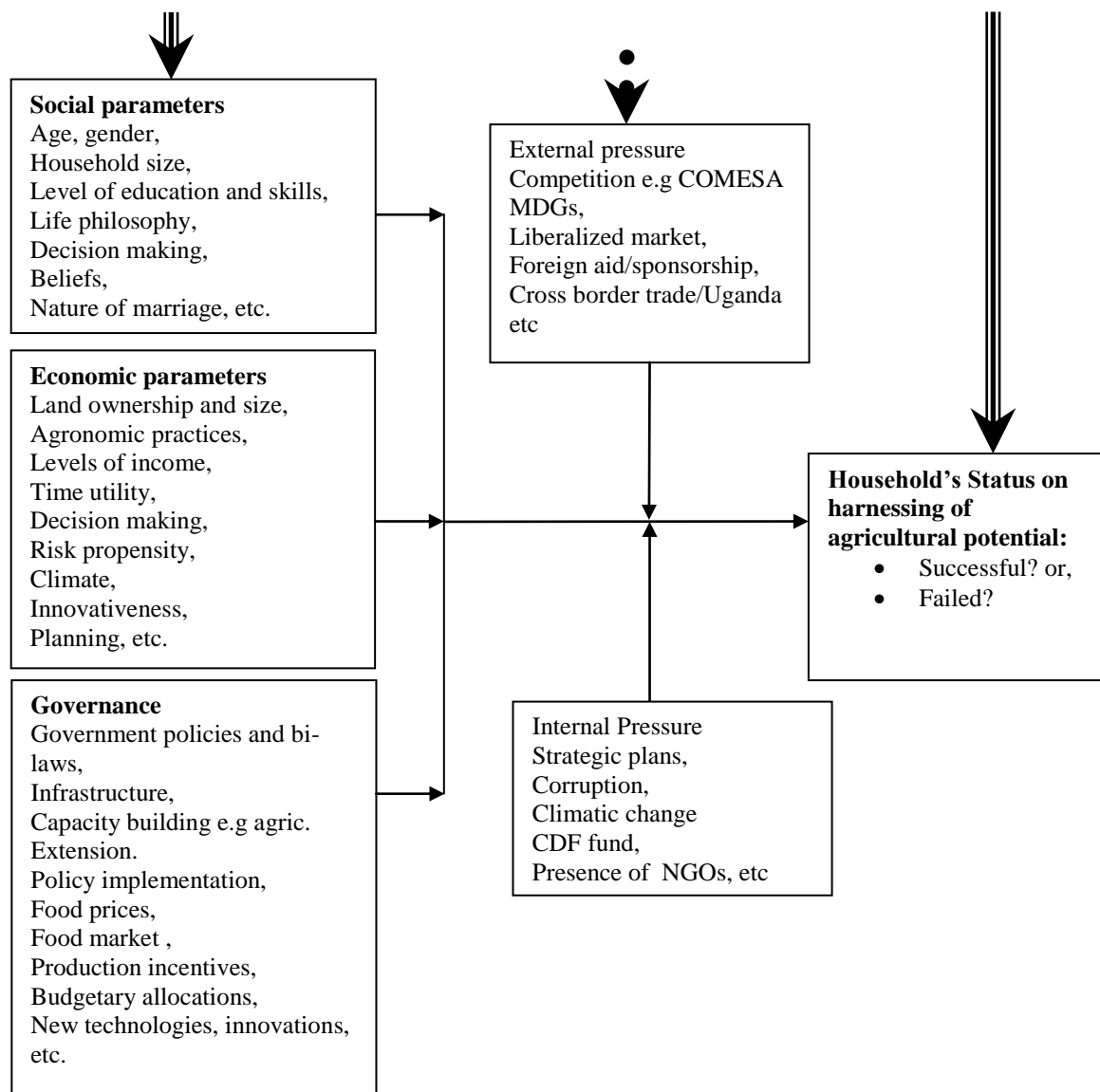


Figure 1.1: The Conceptual Framework Guiding the Study

## RESULTS

In this section, findings of the study have been presented, analyzed, interpreted and discussed. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis have been employed. The findings have been presented by the use of matrix tables, means, percentages, narratives, descriptions and quotations.

### Social Parameters Influencing Agricultural Production in Busia County

In this section, the salient social characteristics of the respondents in the survey sample are described as the basis for a more analytical treatment of the findings. The survey targeted any spouse in an autonomous homestead, which is composed of a nuclear, polygynous, or single-parent household, with or without unmarried children and married sons if they have not yet split to set up their own. The main social parameters of concern included the respondents' age, gender, level of education, level of skills and

knowledge, decision making at household level, nature of social organization, beliefs, life philosophy, household size, rites of passage, and social authority that in one way or the other, affect harnessing of agricultural potential at the household level.

### Age of the Respondents

The age of the respondents was an important demographic characteristic in this study. From the findings, we have a diverse age brackets represented in the sample; 176 (35.5%) of the respondents were in the age bracket of 20 – 39 years; 245 (49%) were in the range of 40 – 59 years; 53 (10.5%) were in the range of 60 – 69 years; 18 (3.5%) were within 70 – 79 years, while the remaining 8 (1.5%) were within the age bracket of 80 years and above. This has been summarized in the Table below.

Table 1: Age of the Respondents

Age Bracket in Years	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
20 -39	176	35.5	35.5
40 -59	245	49.0	84.5
60 – 69	53	10.5	95.0
70 and above	26	5	100

The above findings indicate that respondents aged between 40 and 59 years formed the majority of respondents interviewed. The results also show through the cumulative percentage that most (84%) of the farmers in Busia County are within the energetic-working population of the age bracket 20 to 59, with a relatively small number (16%) of the aged, that is, over 60 years. Basing on these findings, one would expect such a population to be self-reliant especially in agricultural production given the fact that they have the labour force to work on their farms, with relatively favorable soils and climatic conditions. Similarly, findings by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) (2013) showed the rate of unemployment at 70%, while 71% of the labour force in Busia County is engaged on family farms. However, that is not the situation I observed on ground; most of the able-bodied members especially youths in the villages are idling, most household farms are under no or little crop, most households go with little food especially from own farm production, and households in the County generally rely on buying foodstuff including the basic vegetable that can easily be produced at home. Further observation indicated that only the household heads are active in agricultural activities while the rest of the able-bodied members are less engaged because parents no longer seem to have control over their children and dependants due to the changing socio-economic conditions. Therefore, most of this high potential labour force is either not put to use or underutilized.

**The sex of Respondents**

In the random sample of 500 farmers, 295 (59%) of the respondents were male, while 205 (41%) were female. There were more male than female respondents partly because of the social and cultural significance. Men are generally considered as the household heads vested with the authority to manage the productive resources of the household including being the spokespersons of the households. Therefore, in situations where both spouses were available during the study, both preferred to have the husband/male interviewed because men are considered household heads and thus, in a better position to speak for and on behalf of the household. Secondly, when a woman is presented with an opportunity to give an opinion about the household in the presence of her husband, she makes all efforts to avoid making comments lest she contradicts her husband or be misconstrued as competing him in providing leadership. Thirdly, Busia County with poverty levels of 64%, is a low outmigration region

evidenced by the fact 385(77%) of the respondents indicated that male household heads were actually present and residing at home.

However, practical observation and evidence from existing data on Busia County indicated that women are more (425,622, 53.13%) than men (390,830, 47.87%) in the general population (816,452) (GoK, 2013). Despite majority of the study participants being male, further observation indicated that women provide most of the labour for agronomic activities, harvesting, processing and marketing in agricultural production processes, while men made most of the decisions across these levels of production. When critically analyzed, women are the actual producers of food in Busia County. These findings agree with the earlier observation by GoK (2009), which indicated that women in Kenya contribute over 70% of the agricultural activities of labour in household and reproduction, yet they have least control of the same. This means that if we have to transform agricultural production and enhance food security in Busia County, we must emancipate women in these households; to have both the means and also decisions to drive agricultural innovations.

**Education Level of the Sample Population**

The level of formal education is an important variable in any given population. This is because it not only influence other demographic attributes, but also socio-economic characteristics of the population. The 500 respondents interviewed had varied levels of education. Two hundred and ninety three (58.5%) of them had reached primary level. One hundred and thirty five (27%) had reached secondary level; 40 (8%) had reached tertiary level, while 32 (6.4%) had not had formal education as summarized in the Table below.

Table 2: Level of Education for the Sample Population

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Primary	293	58.6	58.6
Secondary	135	27	85.6
Tertiary	40	8	93.6
None	32	6.4	100
Total	500	100	

These findings show that most (58.6%) of the respondents had reached the primary level of education. This implied low-level of formal education among most of the household heads that participated in the study. This translates into a semi-skilled labour force, which is also confined to the rural settings. The danger of this in agricultural production is that such a population trait becomes an obstacle to change and specifically adoption of innovations. This was witnessed in Bunyala sub-county where during an interview with agricultural extension officers, they alluded to the fact that smallholder farmers in the area are well-informed and in some cases saturated with information on

agricultural innovations. That notwithstanding, the same farmers have the lowest level of uptake for agricultural innovations to transform their agricultural challenges to livelihood opportunities. However, when the study interrogated households, it was evident that poverty in its broadest sense exacerbates and underlies the low uptake. For instance, most farmers go for meetings called by extension officers only if they will be paid some sitting allowance. They also selectively implement farming projects that are either highly subsidized or sponsored. This means that it is the financial gains rather than the knowledge or ideas that pull farmers into meeting intended to change their life situations.

During visits in Butula and Nambale Sub-Counties, I observed that most of the household farms were not under any crop during farming season; and for those with crops, the crops were just scattered and uncared for. The agricultural extension officers in these sub-counties attributed this to lack of information by some farmers, ignorance, lack of interest to seek extension services, carelessness, and leaving everything to fate. One of the extension officers asserted that; "it is all about their minds. How they see, define and approach farming with regard to perceptions and the actual activities they would prefer to engage in. This would not be the situation if these farmers are educated in one way or the other." The assumption being that when people are educated, they seek information and are likely to make rational decisions seeking to maximize returns for any livelihood activities they would wish to engage in.

The education status of the parents was however, crucial in determining the educational status of the children. Out of the 500 respondents interviewed, 395 (79%) had their children currently in school at various levels. Of the remaining 105, 27(26%) had children but too young to be in school, while 78(74%) had children but old or married and not in school. Out of the 395 respondents with children currently in school, 371 (94%) had children in school were within primary and secondary level, while 24 (6%) were within tertiary and university level. This means that we have at least 1 child on average in school per household in the sample population.

The study further observed that, parents who had reached tertiary and/or university levels of education (like the teachers in the County) had the initiative to educate their children to the highest level of education possible. However, majority of the remaining parents were contented with their children finishing the basic level - primary or secondary levels of education and getting married. This could be explained by the fact that most of the parents did not reach such high levels of education themselves.

Of course, poverty is also a factor in the ability to keep one's children at school. It was observed that, despite the free primary education scheme, some parents did not want to take their children to school. In fact, some were forced by the local administrators through legal threats to do so. Other parents want their children to continue staying at home to help in household chores without realizing that this compromises the children's future. In a recent report by an organization called Uwezo (2015) on the status of the free primary education in Kenya, Busia County was number five (5) among counties with children in standard eight who cannot read and/or comprehend standard four's work. This was because of absenteeism due to lack of seriousness on the side of the parents to keep children in school.

Ideally, education is a critical input that can transform a population over generations to redefine their situation. Busia County has a poverty level of 64.2% against the national average of 45.9% (GoK, 2013). The implication of a population with such levels of education is that it risks living in a continuous state of poverty, as it cannot take advantage of the potentials and opportunities available. According to the Chronic Poverty Report 2004 – 05 (2004), for many, education may be a critical pathway out of poverty. Formal education is strongly associated with improvement in quality of labour as an asset. The report further shows that in some contexts such as Pakistan and China, formal education that is needed to decrease the probability of chronic poverty is secondary schooling, but in others, literacy alone makes a difference. This study found that the years of schooling for chronically poor adults was significantly low at an average of 11 years, which implies a high dependency ratio in such households as was witnessed in most households under study.

For Busia County, basic education like in the case of Pakistan and China, or literacy alone may not work. This is because most Kenyans already have basic education, a situation that calls for one to excel further into professional training if he/she has to escape poverty by securing skills for agricultural production or competencies for stable employment. Information from agricultural officers in the County showed that the current effort is to encourage farmers to employ agri-business approach, which may not work if a population has such a low uptake for innovations witnessed in Bunyala, Nambale, Samia and other parts of the County. This means that education does not only refer to having the formal education as such, but also having the knowledge and competence that could be used in pursuit of food security.

Some of the respondents admitted that, they had low agricultural production because the extension officers

did not visit as it used to be in the 1980s to early 1990s when farmers were taught various methods of farming, soil conservation, and livestock keeping strategies. This again questions the current demand-driven extension approach, which was assumed to be relevant countrywide. My finding was that demand-driven approach is ideal for farmers who are knowledgeable, information-seeking, and interested, but not in such a case as in Busia where, they have to be reminded even on the most basic issues in farming practices. Overall, it is emerging that the level of formal education and literacy is not just the key to break the poverty cycle, but also reduce food insecurity tendencies at the household level.

### **Nature of Social Organization and Life Philosophies**

Issues of how communities and the society at large are structured, the household and family living arrangements, institutions and the underlying life philosophies largely influence the actual household production and consumption behaviour, personality patterns, food habits and preferences. During the study, through observations, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, various issues emerged regarding the social organization of communities living in Busia County. It was found that the County is largely dominated by various Luhya groups. However, in Teso north and Teso south Sub-Counties, members from the Teso community dominate. This does not mean that Busia is exclusive to these two ethnic groups, but they are the dominant groups in the villages as per the seven sub-counties. Apart from the ecological variance, the Teso (being Nilotes) and Luhya (Bantu), presents its set of issues with regard to household food security status. Both the Luhya and Teso communities produce maize, millet, sorghum and cassava as the main staples. However, the Luhya groups have a strong preference for maize unlike the Teso who vary between maize, millet, sorghum and cassava.

Therefore, although maize is preferred among the Luhya in Nambale, Butula, Bunyala, Samia and Matayos Sub-Counties (about 90% of the County population), the soils in those sub-counties are acidic and not good for maize production (PALWECO, 2014). What I observed is that despite their knowledge that the maize crop is not performing well, these Luhya communities have insisted to grow and rely on it specifically. Eventually, they have very low returns in form of harvests. Secondly, the maize is not given time to mature. Because of low income levels, lack of patience and chronic food shortages, family members start consuming the little maize available when they are still green. This also attracts thieves to their farms when they know that the owners are already consuming the crop. Eventually, when the maize dries for harvest, over half of the crop yield is lost through the boiling, roasting and

theft of the green maize. Consequently, most households do not harvest enough. Within one month, that is, between August and September, most of the households would have exhausted their crop harvest and they go back to buying from the market. According to agricultural extension officers, consumption of green maize is an ingredient for food insecurity, especially now that maize is the main staple crop.

Similarly, food losses through wastage during harvest and post harvesting processes were common. For instance, wasteful rationing of meals because there is plenty. A case in point is where in times of harvest or plenty, women prepare food and serve each member his or her share of meal, which they don't even finish and eventually a lot of it remains and is wasted. This is unlike the Luhya traditional way where the meal was put on one plate and all members share with little wastage: commonly practiced today mainly in times of food shortage today. The paradox here is that in one month of the year, during harvest, food is wasted and even thrown, and in the next month the same food is missing and members are back to starving for the rest of the year.

I also found that male circumcision is a major rite of passage across communities in Busia County – especially the Luhya dominated sub-counties mentioned before. It is commonly practiced during the months of August and December especially during even calendar years like 2014 when the study was being conducted. Critical to this study is the timing of the events, which traditionally occur during harvest seasons. The consequences of this is that they were blamed for depleting household food resources because those being circumcised would go round the villages soliciting gifts in the form of food resources. Because this happens during the day and night, the people escorting the young boys also invade and destroy farms along the routes they follow in the night leading to food losses. It was found that during circumcision period, most of the norms and values are relaxed, and people use vulgar language and can engage in such destructive events like destroying food resources and get away with it.

In contrast, Teso north and Teso south Sub-Counties have better ecological environment for food production compared to the rest of the county. They therefore, produce maize in two major seasons with better harvests than the rest of the county. They also rely on a variety of crops for their staples: maize, cassava, millet and sorghum; and they don't support or practice circumcision rites. Consequently, they are found to be more food secure than the rest of the sub-counties. Two major issues are critical here to counter food shortages in Busia County; the need to diversify dietary needs, and the need to strictly monitor the production to harvesting, post-harvesting

and consumption loses of food resources. It is not easy to change some cultural practices. However, the underlying need to shade off some retrogressive cultural rituals cannot be underscored. These include restrictive food preferences in favour of variety and early maturing and drought resistant crops such as millet and sorghum, which can also do well in poor soils in the Sub-County, being overemphasized.

Throughout Busia County, the extension and agricultural officers interviewed complained of low uptake of agricultural innovations. Further interrogation on this revealed that most farmers are generally materially poor. They have therefore developed a sub-culture of begging. They keep on complaining about their challenges but with little or no efforts to come out of them. This has extended to all sectors of life where in farming, there is a general tendency to seek for handouts, be paid to attend agricultural activities organized by extension officers, be paid for them to listen to the extension officers in those meeting, and therefore, motivated by the cash incentives rather than ideas under discussion. They have a feeling of deprivation and see any cost as unbearable and unachievable.

**Household Headship and Decision Making**

Households were the main units of analysis in this study. Findings indicate that households also form the basic units of production, distribution and consumption - where decisions on labour allocation, what to plant or not, where to cultivate or not, food sharing, consumption, food purchase, and who provides money within the household are made. Out of the 500 respondents interviewed 470 (93.5%) of them said that the husband was the household head, while 30 (6.5%) said it was the wife that was the household head as shown in Table below.

Table 3: Household Headship

Household head	Frequency	Percent
Husband/father	470	93.5
Wife/mother	30	6.5
Total	500	100

Analysis in Table TT above shows that husbands were the main household heads in the sample population. This was also true to the larger population in Busia County, which is generally patriarchal. This actually means that inheritance and tracing of one’s descent was through the male line: father and sons or uncles, but not mother or aunts. For the few women who were household heads, these were mainly widows whose husband had died and therefore, putatively, the heads of their households. Further, household headship is an important variable in relation to decision making process at the household level, control and allocation of food resources, and the general management of the household’s affairs. Household food status depends mainly on the nature of decisions the household

heads make. For example during the study, I observed that most of the household’s arable land was not under any crop during planting season. When I asked the household members about it, it emerged that most household heads have given up on their children (sons and daughters). That they cannot put them to task to force them into farming due to lack of social control emerging from general deviance among the younger generation. It is this lack of social control that leads to many youth idling instead of working on their household farms as it was previously observed. This has largely compromised utilization of household labour for agricultural production. This is why despite the total land area in Busia being classified as a high potential agricultural land (GoK, 1995); only 40% of tillable land is utilized, while the remaining 60% is idle (Busia County, June, 2014).

During literature search in the County, I encountered the Busia County Issue no. 001 of June 2014, a publication of the County Government of Busia. In this newspaper, the heading was “County government to franchise agriculture to boost food production.” The governor was quoted as follows: “...we want the farmers to take advantage of the availability of these 7 tractors at K.Sh.48million to increase their land tilling capacity, which currently stands at 40% to 80%.” He was justifying the purchase of 7 tractors for each sub-county to encourage farmers to till their land. The farmers were to access tractors through their respective sub-county agricultural offices where they register and pay for the tilling fee. However, my observation was that most of the farmers were not utilizing the tractors. They claimed that they could not afford the K.Sh. 2000 shilling they are to pay for tilling per acre. The other challenge was that tilling is one thing but the weeding and tendering of the crops, which requires the other forms of labour, was a challenge because most of the able-bodied members of the household are idling than attending to agricultural activities. The overall result is that the tractors are not fully utilized and in cases where they are used, it is only benefiting a few financially well-to-do and/or private sugarcane farmers in the County. Household decision making is critical to agronomic practices and the way they are practiced. During data collection, it emerged that most farmers in the County lack the knowledge and skills to apply appropriate agronomic practices. Observations, focused group discussions and visits to various villages in the county revealed that most farmers have poor timing on when to plant, weed and even harvest their crops. Farmers in Busia rely mainly on rain-fed agriculture. As a result, most farmers have scanty information on rain patterns and the changing seasons due to climate change effects. Most of them do late preparations where they also rush. They also lack a clear calendar of events throughout the year. This means that they follow what the rest or others



are doing whether it is relevant to their specific conditions or not.

The use and application of farm inputs is low with low knowledge on the appropriate crops to grow. All these reflect decisions made at the household level. For instance I asked one of the farmers why he had not planted this season when there was a lot of rain going to waste. His answer was that people in his area had not planted. So who is he to plant? This means that the farmers may not necessarily be rational in their decisions, but still have their own logic that can still explain their behaviour. My interest here was why do they hold onto logic that has a negative bearing on food availability in their households? The answer lies in their underlying low level of education, poverty, ignorance, lack of exposure, and low information transfer. These are conditions that seem to mask their scope of thinking, narrow their focus, while lowering their self esteem to the level that they cannot control their own situation, they become dependent, fatalistic, and limited in the extent that they can go to improve their own household food availability situation.

#### Household Size

Household food self-sufficiency situation was of a major concern to this study. According to the national food policy (1994), availability of adequate supplies of food at the national level will not ensure access to food by households and individuals. The ability of households and individuals to obtain sufficient food depends on among other factors; whether they grow their own food and, their ability to generate income from alternative sources. This is why household dynamics were of crucial concern during data analysis. According to the 500 respondents interviewed, 90 (18.1%) had between 1 to 5 members in the household, 287 (57.3) had between 6 to 10 members, while 123 (24.6%) had over 11 members as summarized in Table below.

Table 4: Number of people in the household

Household size	Frequency	Percent
1 to 5 members	90	18
6 to 10 members	287	57
>11 members	123	25
Total	500	100

The above results indicate that majority of the households that participated in the study had between 6 and 10 members, which tallies with earlier findings by Sorre (2013) that showed an average of 6 members per household in Busia County. These include both offspring and non- offspring members of the family, which is indicative of the dependency burden in terms of mouths to be fed and taken care off. A notable aspect of the household was that most of the household members were dependants-either children or elderly, but non-working: all under the

care of the household's head. These findings further support statistics on age as presented in Busia District Development Plan ( 1997 – 2001:11), which indicated that 50.3% of the population in the County were aged between 0 to 14 years, while 60% of the population falls under 20 years. In population studies, a youthful and dependent population such as this is more of consumption rather than production – oriented that quickly drains the household's food resources. However, if their family labour potential can be harnessed as earlier noted, then they can be transformed into a great resource for food production. These findings also agree with the earlier observations by KDHS (2009), which highlighted that high dependency ratio and overreliance on subsistence farming explains high poverty (64.2%) and high food poverty (54.4%) in Busia County. It is therefore, evident that the main challenge in most households is the presence of many members that are not adding value in terms of their contribution to household productivity in agricultural production. Therefore, the need to mobilize and harness labour from members of the households that are less productive.

#### CONCLUSION

This study was aimed at understanding the underlying socio factors that explain the paradox of food insecurity in places of plenty, with specific reference to Busia County. It is evident that social factors: age, household size, weakening of traditional norms and values, nature of household headship and decision making, nature of social organization and life philosophies, education level, beliefs, and the sex of respondents; have a direct influence on the behaviour of the farmer that also affects his/her involvement in farming activities.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings presented in this study indicate that social aspects coupled with the high poverty rates in the county underlie low utilization of the household agricultural potential in the study area. Therefore, it is my recommendation that:

1. Production of high value crops to maximize potential, provide quick returns, and utilize youths be highly encouraged by all stakeholders.
2. There is Need for focused-interventional capacity building on how to guide smallholder farmers on how to contribute to economic growth by being active players.
3. There is need for subsidized farming interventions especially with regard to inputs that seem unaffordable for most small-holder farmers in the study area.

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