

UNSCRAMBLING THE POVERTY PUZZLE “Food Security and the Poverty Paradox”

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“If the misery of our POOR be caused not by laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin . . .”. Charles Darwin. *“Voyage of the Beagle”*.

Food As Illusion of Prosperity

In Belize, kinship and friendship was customarily bonded in reciprocal food exchange, which was a strategy in broadening one’s food resources. Food whether for consumption, production, or preparation, was often a subject of conversation in the community. Topics included arguments on good days for planting, what constitutes a good meal, neighbours announcing the arrival of game-meat, and even the borrowing of ingredients and utensils. All in all, food was a framework for social relations among kinfolk. However, this is fast changing.

One example of such a change was observed in the northern communities. Their venture into agricultural expansion for export drastically changed social relations. Diet and consumption patterns were also changed. Food production declined when small farmers opted to work as wage labourers in the sugar cane fields. As dependence on wage labour increased, farms were abandoned, and food production decreased. At the same time consumption practices shifted to reliance on imported food items. So that imported food purchases increased as Nescafe displaced fever-grass, apple replaced govna plum, and so on. Also the imported items became more socially acceptable compared with the locally produced foods.

However, imported food prices have little to do with wage rates at the local level. Wage rates do not increase along with the growth in the cost of living due to the externally influenced imported food items. As a result, the strategies for survival deteriorated. The households that could not control their own subsistence often went short, or at risk for food security.

Are You What You Eat?

Food importation in itself is not negative. But, it is the fact that some imported food items are just not affordable. Also some of the imported food items can be produced in Belize, while creating jobs. On an average, 59% of the cost of an individual’s minimum daily food basket is imported. Also 42% of all food items consumed on a daily basis are imported.

The table below demonstrates that individuals in the Corozal District spend the most (67%) on imported foods. While individuals in the Toledo District spend the least (29%). Also individuals in the Toledo District consume the least (34%) number of imported food items; and individuals in the Cayo District consume the most (56%).

The table offers two challenges. Firstly, the average daily food cost per person, per household is \$3.32, and the average number of individuals per household is 5.3. Therefore the cost of basic food items to an average size Belizean family is approximately \$17.00. Needless to say, this is not affordable if one’s farm wage labour is

\$15.00 to \$20.00.

Minimum Cost Daily food Basket at June 1996

District	Daily Cost	% No. of Imports	% Cost of Imports
Country	\$3.32	42%	59%
Corozal	3.30	50	67
Orange Walk	2.87	41	57
Belize	2.81	41	56
Cayo	3.25	56	54
Stann Creek	3.06	41	47
Toledo	4.48	34	29

Secondly, although individuals in Toledo consume the least number of food imports, yet Toledo's daily food cost is the highest. One reason for this is that imported food items are more expensive in Toledo, due to its distance from the distribution center, Belize City. Geographic location in terms of proximity to Belize City influences food prices and therefore accessibility and stability of food items at the household level.

What are these imported food items that we are consuming? They are: canned fish for all districts except Belize, Corozal, and Cayo did not list any fresh fish at all; mixed vegetables along with carrots and peas; and cooking oils and dairy food products. Since there is a shift from traditional foods, Belizeans generally share the same consumption pattern. That is three meals per day, two of which comprise mainly starchy foods. Wheat bread is the most recurring food item for breakfast and supper; while rice with beans is most frequently selected for lunch. Beverages include tea or coffee for adults and powdered milk for the young. Fresh fish and meat are often substituted with imported, canned fish and meats, such as spam and sardines.

Socio-Economic Issues Affecting Food Accessibility and Stability

The woman has the ultimate power to decide what the household will consume; however, she tends to cater to the spouse's food peculiarities first. So that consumption patterns invariably center around the adult male in the household. Consumption pattern also affects food security at the household level. This is not only a factor of quantity and quality, but also the timeliness in accessing food, and the variety of food items. For example, lack of variety results in monotonous food; and the untimely arrival of the fisherman creates uncertainties for the daily food supply. To ensure food security in her household, the housewife invariably devises strategies such as: constricting consumption; limiting food supply to a bare minimum—purchasing only for the next meal; increasing income—selling food items as a source of cash, mobilizing other household members such as children and mothers to enter the workforce; and through non-cash exchanges for food.

Our attitude about food rather than its nutritive value dictates our dietary practices. Our culture influences items selected for food (quality), as well as the quantity. For example, some food items are not eaten by pregnant women or young children, and the rejection of certain food items during a certain season. Also during ethnic religious ceremonies, the host family is obligated to share large quantities of food with relatives and friends. Our acceptance of imported food items, even at great economic and social

expense, is now a part of our culture.