



Mrs A.'s typical food purchases. Photo: Carolyne Cherop

WHAT ARE PEOPLE EATING?

Views from *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility*

Mrs A., slum dweller in Mukuru, Kenya, 2013

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This case study is one of several produced to accompany *Help Yourself!*, the second year synthesis report from the *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* research project. Other case studies, country reports, synthesis reports, and further information about the project can be found at www.oxfam.org.uk/foodprices

Mrs A. is 30 years old and runs a greengrocer in Mukuru, the second biggest informal settlement in Nairobi. Her husband is a security guard. Their 12-year-old son goes to primary school.

Mrs A. only started her grocery business a couple of months ago, to supplement her husband's income. She now earns KSH 100 to 150 per day (£0.70–£1.00). She explains that almost half of what she earns is spent on food while the other half goes to replacing stock. She is unable to save.

In Mukuru, where the costs of living have been increasing over the past years while wages have largely remained stagnant, shopkeepers have introduced new ways of making food accessible to people with little cash at hand, by repackaging goods into smaller quantities. Consumers can now buy a quarter or half packet of maize flour, instead of the traditional 2kg packet. This in turn had led to real value price hikes.

In addition, last year, the government introduced a new VAT Act, which substantially reduced the number of goods and services previously exempt from the tax. At the time of our study, the government had proposed to impose VAT on essential products including bread, rice, maize flour and milk. The act became operational shortly after we collected data, with a 16 per cent tax on essential goods. However, after mounting opposition by civil society groups and members of the opposition in parliament, the Act was reviewed to exempt bread, rice, milk, wheat, milk formula for infants, maize flour, first aid kits, vaccines, bandages and sanitary towels so as to cushion Kenyans, especially the unemployed and those on low incomes. Despite the U-turn at government level, however, the cost of some goods did not fall back to their original prices. For example a 500ml packet of milk cost KSH 35 before the Act; after its passing the price shot up to KSH 55–60. After the amendment to the Act it fell only to KSH 45, i.e. KSH 10 more than it cost originally.

Items	Current price (KSH)	Last year's price (KSH)
Milk (500ml sachet)	55	30
Sugar 250g	35	20
Maize flour 2kg	105	81
Tomatoes	Dependent on season. At the time of report writing they are plentiful, with four large tomatoes costing KSH 10.	
Onions – 1 piece	5	4
Tea leaves (weighed) – smallest amount	10	8
Vegetables - <i>sukuma wiki</i> (enough for her household)	20	15
Cooking oil 250ml	55	37
Water 20l can	3	3

Mrs A. explains that since her husband works at night and therefore sleeps most of the day, she has to do all the housework, including the cooking. For breakfast, the family has black tea with fried beans. Lunch and dinner both consist of *ugali* (maize meal) with *sukuma wiki* (greens), which she explains is the cheapest meal: *'I know we are not eating well but that is all I can afford for now.'*

However, she tells us that sometimes they go without supper and have black tea instead. They also cannot afford to drink tea with milk every day anymore. Mrs A. explains that it is getting more and more difficult to explain to her son why they do not eat meat or fish as often as before.

The typical staple items Mrs A.'s family buys now, as illustrated in the cover image, consists of a bar of soap (500g), tea leaves (30g), bread (400g), maize flour (2kg), cooking oil (1l) and sugar (2kg).

Mrs A. tells us that she has tried to go to the chief's office to receive some aid, but came back empty-handed. She adds that food was given out according to how well people were known by the village elders: *'There are those people who make the line and still come back and get some more while some people like me have not even received the first round'*.

Male participants in a focus group discussion in Mukuru went further, with some arguing: *'There is a lot of pushing in the queues made. So one might receive the food but you may go home with a broken leg/arm. It is for the strong not the sick and elderly,'* and *'relief food comes rarely and when it does it is too little that is why people injure one another. Many people think the chief also takes a bit of that food with his administration police.'*

In 2010, the Kenyan government passed a new constitution, which recognizes the Right to Food for all its citizens.

When asked whether hungry people have a right to food, Mrs A. replies: *'The constitution protects the rights of the rich and the mighty not people like us. How does one even go about accusing the government because they have slept hungry?'*

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail research@oxfam.org.uk

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