

Policy Brief

Navigating Food Culture Transitions: Policy Insights from Ghana

Executive Summary

Food culture changes affect domestic food production, trade, consumption, livelihoods, and human health. This policy brief draws on findings from a comprehensive study aimed at understanding shifts in food supplies and consumption within Ghana, outlining critical policy and management considerations. The study combined the analysis of food supply data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and literature review. We identified four key food supply issues for policy and management considerations. First, dietary energy and protein supply depend significantly on staples (cassava, yams, maize and rice). Rice is not yet a dominant source of primary energy supply. Domestic production of these staples significantly exceeds imports, highlighting the potential for supply

chain enhancements. Second, the share of chicken meat in protein supply is rising steadily compared to other animal-based protein sources. At the same time, the supply of red meat (and related protein) is dwindling. Third, oranges are the dominant fruit supplied in Ghana. Fourth, tomatoes and derived products are the primary vegetables supplied in Ghana. This brief calls for policy attention to the enhancement of the supply chains of traditional staples to improve nutrition and jobs or incomes based on agriculture. Chicken production should be vital to managing food culture change to enhance cheaper and broader access to animal-based protein in Ghana. Addressing these issues would support controlled transitions in Ghana's food culture.

Introduction

Food production and consumption are intricately linked to human health, livelihoods, food security, and cultural identity. The totality of values, norms, habits, beliefs, and practices that underpin and drive food production, handling, processing, distribution, and consumption make up what we consider food culture. Changes in food culture result from alterations in food production and consumption patterns. Such changes in food culture can result in substantial socio-economic, political, and environmental changes, such as loss of income by farmers, shifts in the labour sector, changes in healthcare needs, and food insecurity. For example, increased consumption of highly processed foods is linked to the prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart-related ailments.

Many developing countries (Ghana included) have undergone a food cultural change due mainly to Western influence with a shift towards high consumption of meat, ultra-processed foods, fats, salts, and sugars. This Westernisation of diet is perceived as progressive, civilising, and a badge of affluence by many, but it is also the basis of several NCDs and a decline in domestic agricultural value. This policy brief draws attention to issues essential to policy and management decisions on food cultural change or transitions in Ghana. It is derived from a study conducted by a team from the University of Cape Coast and the University of the West Indies, with support from the DARAP project.

Methodology

There are several data-intensive ways to assess changes in food supplies and diets. Data in the food balance sheet on the production and trade database provided by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), for example, allows a consistent comparison of nations' dietary supplies over time. As a result, we used the FAO datasets to assess the supplies and consumption of major food types in Ghana since 1980. Our assessment mainly focused on the supply

and sources of dietary energy and protein as critical elements of food security. This was complemented by a systematic review and meta-analyses of peer-reviewed literature to understand Ghana's food culture's broader context and state.

Main Findings and Issues for Policy



Cassava, corn, yams, and rice are critical for food security as they supply the bulk of dietary energy and protein.

Our analysis showed that, from 1980 to date, the traditional staples (mainly cassava, yams, maize, and rice) are the dominant source of dietary energy (78%) and total protein (71%) supply to Ghanaians. The contributions of cassava, yams, and maize are larger than rice. Contrary to perceptions, rice is not yet a dominant nutritional energy source, and wheat products (such as flour or pizza) are not yet significant. Except for rice, domestic production of these food crops is much higher than imports, highlighting their critical role in the local food culture and food security. There is a need, therefore, to prioritize the enhancements of the productivity and associated value chains of these staples.

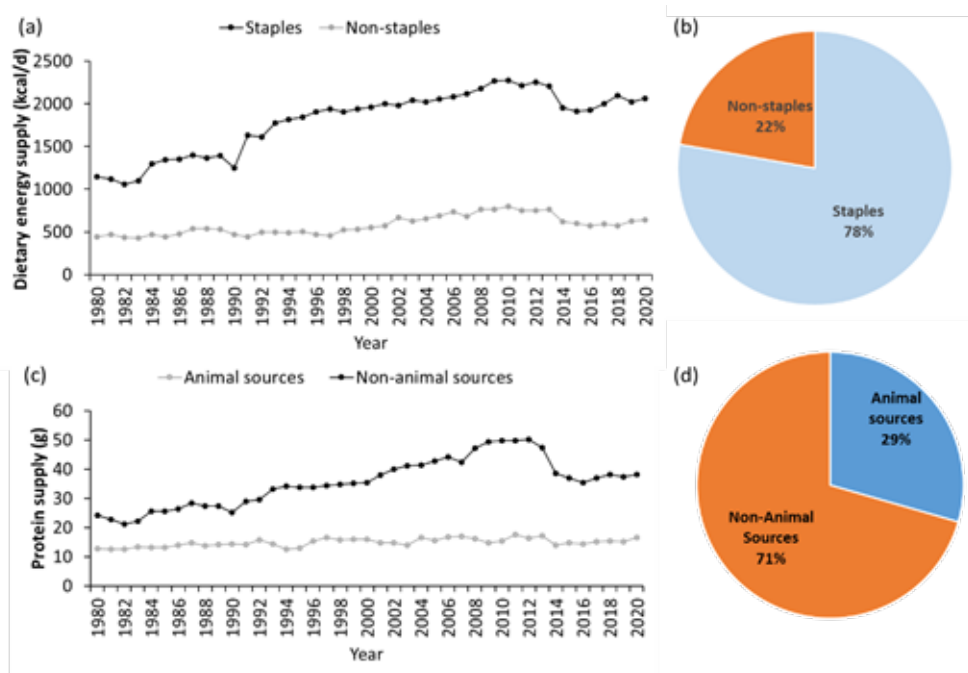


Figure 1. Average dietary energy supply (a & b) per person per day and proportionate protein supply (c & d) from animal sources and staples in Ghana.



Fish and seafood important but chicken is gaining prominence

Fish and seafood remain Ghana's largest animal-based protein sources, but chicken is fast becoming essential and could quickly overtake all animal-based protein sources. Supply of red meat, however, is declining, indicating a need for increased production of traditional small ruminants (e.g., goats), complemented with small rodents like grasscutter (or even rabbits) as sources of proteins. This is important as Ghana's per capita protein supply needs boosting to comparable levels in Africa and the world. Consequently, the low consumption of animal-based protein and overall protein supply might suggest gaps that require urgent attention.



Support orange and tomato production and value chains

Our findings show that orange is the dominant fruit in Ghana, while tomatoes and derived products (such as tomato paste) account for the largest share of vegetables consumed in Ghana. Given that a significant share of tomato-based food products (especially tomato paste) are imported, paying attention to domestic production, value chains, and trade of these commodities is crucial. The value chain of oranges can be improved significantly to support local livelihoods and food security, as oranges are a vital source of vitamin C, which boosts immunity.



Figure 2. Greenhouse-produced tomatoes in Ghana. (Photo credit: Michael Adu)

Conclusions

Traditional staples account for Ghana's largest share of food consumption, dietary energy and protein supply. Based on our result, we conclude that Ghana's food culture remains largely traditional. While the consumption of chicken meat, rice and foods derived from wheat flour is growing in importance, especially in urban areas, it is only driving a transition (from fish and seafood to chicken or maize, root and tubers to rice) but may not totally transform the food culture in the short term. Ghanaians rely considerably on the domestic production of the traditional staples for food, making these highly critical for food security. Improving these crops' productivity and value chains is vital to effectively manage changes in the food culture and limit the undesirable socio-economic, political, and environmental consequences associated with rapid changes in the food culture.

Recommendations

- The government must collaborate with all other stakeholders to focus on boosting the production of traditional staples such as cassava, yams, and maize and significantly improving the value chains of these crops.
- Similarly, the government must focus on improving rice and chicken production, productivity, and distribution, for which a strong domestic capacity and market opportunities would help limit imports. This should not be detrimental to promoting and supporting aquaculture and fisheries as essential protein sources.
- To enhance food security, the Ministry of Agriculture must focus on two main dietary energy food crops (e.g. cassava and maize) and two primary protein sources (e.g. fish and chicken) to make them widely accessible and stable in supply.
- The government should work with relevant stakeholders to improve the diversity of fruits and vegetables consumed in the country while bolstering citrus and tomato production and value chains to improve nutrition and health.
- The government and the private sector should explore opportunities to incrementally incentivize domestic production of heavily imported food commodities that can be produced locally (e.g. rice and chicken meat) while raising appropriate barriers to importing these commodities.



Source: Freepik

Acknowledgements

This brief presents findings and policy recommendations on food waste outlined in a synthesis report developed by researchers engaged under the DARAP Project. The report, titled “Food balance: Changing food cultures and food supply sources in Ghana” is accessible via the DARAP website, www.darap.issler.edu.gh. Opinions stated in this brief and the report it draws from are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of DARAP and its partners.



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The **Data Repository and Advocacy for Policy (DARAP)** project focuses on promoting the access and effective use of data and knowledge products to influence policymaking processes and outcomes. It contributes to evidence-led policymaking through data management services and capacity building in research data interpretation and usage, collaborating with civil society organisations and academics. DARAP is funded by The Open Society Institute and based at the Measurement, Learning, and Evaluation (MLE) Unit at the Institute of Statistical Social and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana.

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