



## What is the role of social relations and networks in household food security and nutrition?

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My ability to access and consume nutritious food is to some extent an outcome of my membership and relationships with other members of society: as a daughter, a sister, a mother, a daughter-in-law, aunt, cousin, grandchild, development sociologist, employee, land owner, student, and citizen. I am able to access nutritious foods from any of my relations, networks and market through gifting, exchange, loaning or purchase. My case is similar and dissimilar to that of many others. What has changed so that individuals and households are no longer able to rely on their membership in society for assistance in times of need? To identify and discuss success stories, challenges and way forward to achieving food and nutritional security, this discussion focuses on social relations and networks for food security and nutrition.

My name is Eileen Omosa, a graduate student at the University of Alberta, currently writing a dissertation on 'influential factors in household decision-making on choice of land tenure, Kenya'. I also work as a Research Analyst on a study project on food choices in the perinatal period. Before going back for further studies, I spent over ten years working and learning with rural communities in Kenya and in the Eastern and Southern Africa region on the thematic areas of land tenure, forestry and food security, gender relations, cross border collaborative networks, and the management of natural resources-based conflicts. One of the important lessons I have learned from my working with rural land users is that an individual's level of attachment to their community to an extent determines their level of social-economic wellbeing, and that individuals and households with less attachment to community tend to rely more on intensified agricultural production, or resort to the market to fulfil their food security and nutritional requirements. Does it have to be one or the other way, i.e. strong social relations or the market?

As a young girl growing up in rural Kenya, my family had access to land on which we cultivated a variety of food crops including maize and bananas, vegetables and fruits, and reared cows and goats. However, our family still lacked foods such as fish, millet, potatoes, cassava, and ground nuts, which we sourced from relatives (gifted, loaned, exchanged) or from neighbouring tribes through barter trade or purchase (<http://www.eileenomosa.com/myths-on-my-food1/2013/7/28/toothless-yet-the-community-feeds-them-on-fish-beans-nuts>). Our other sources of food transcended blood relations and friendships to include groups traditionally considered to be 'enemy' tribes. Relations with such groups were made possible through marriage and peace pacts for the sake of accessing required foods that were limited to such

communities. The most practical relational and friendship-based practice I witnessed is that of loaning and gifting livestock to households who cannot afford to purchase a cow or milk yet they have infants and young children who require milk for good nutrition. In such a case, households endowed with more livestock (my parents give out cows to needy families to date) give a milk cow to a family in need (*gosagaría*, no equivalent English term) on condition that the receiving family takes good care of the cow (feeds, medical, physical living conditions) and in return benefit by consuming milk from the cow. The agreement is that the cow and any resulting offspring remain the property of the cow giver, to be returned after an agreed upon period of time or on demand. To continue keeping the cow, the receiving family works on maintaining good relations with the giving family. Similarly, the giving family treats the receiving family with respect because as relatives, friends or neighbours, the receiving family too could have a rare product such as vegetables or a skill to give, and such good deeds are believed to bring blessings in the form of good health or wealth to the giving family.

Subsequently, our further discussions will relate to the influential role of social relations and networks (formal and informal) in the achievement of food security and nutrition at the household level. Further input to the discussions to be guided by the following issues:

1. What is your understanding of social relations and networks in food and nutritional security, and do you have examples of the role they play in the attainment of food and nutritional security?
2. What are some of the challenges facing social relations and networks in food and nutritional security?
3. Success stories of examples of social relations and networks that have adapted to our changing environments.
4. What roles can civil society, private sector and governments play to strengthen the application of social relations and networks for food security and nutrition?

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