Paper/Poster Title	**Paper/Poster Title** Too poor to choose? Analysing food agency in food insecure households in rural Burundi

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Abstract	*200 words max*

Food agency has been largely overlooked in academic literature. We operationalise the ability to resist consuming non-preferred or undesirable foods as food agency. In a sample of rural subsistence-based households living in the impoverished regions of Burundi, we assess how food agency is associated with farm production and household income. We used responses to two questions of the HFIAS scale that examine consumption of non-preferred and undesirable foods. Results highlight a worrying lack of food agency, as more than 80% of the households consume such foods. Only households with additional income can avoid non-preferred foods. Farm production is not sufficient to guarantee food agency. We emphasize the need to consider food preferences and choices of low-income consumers in policy design.

Keywords	Low-income households, subsistence-based farming, food agency, food insecurity
JEL Code	D12; Q18 see: www.aeaweb.org/jel/guide/jel.php?class=Q)

Introduction	*100 – 250 words*

Despite the apparent lack of available empirical research on food choices and preferences, food agency of low-income consumers has gained prominence in food security discussions. A 2020 report by the High-Level Panel on Food Security introduced the food agency dimension to food security by referring to the decision-making capacity of individuals and groups concerning their food systems (HLPE, 2020). More precisely, Clapp et al. (2022) refer to food agency as "the capacity of individuals and groups to exercise, voice and make the decision about their food systems". Hence, food agency emphasizes the importance of autonomy and freedom of choice and aligns with broader debates about food sovereignty.

The knowledge on food agency as a dimension of food insecurity is scant, which raises numerous questions. One of these is how low-income consumers are affected by a lack of food agency and, as a result, have no other choice than to consume non-preferred or undesirable foods. In addition, it remains unclear whether the socio-economic situation of households and more in particular their subsistence-based livelihoods actually plays a role in the prevalence of consumption of non -preferred foods as we would expect. Or, put another way, are low-income consumers too poor

to choose? This study contributes to the knowledge on food agency and diet diversity in food-insecure low-income households in the Global South. Our study focusses on farm households in rural Burundi, one of the world's poorest countries where many of the households are facing problems to access the food they enjoy.

Methodology	*100 – 250 words*

The study was conducted in the provinces of Ngozi and Muyinga in the north of Burundi. A large part of Burundi's population lives in rural areas where families widely rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. The estimated prevalence of chronic malnutrition in these areas is alarmingly high. This study uses data collected from farm households in April 2020. A multi-stage sampling approach was used for data collection. After cleaning the data, the responses of a total of 486 households remained, which could be used for the present analysis. The survey collected information on household composition, assets, food consumption, and agricultural production records.

The Household Food Insecurity Access Score (HFIAS) is a widely used and validated tool for measuring food insecurity (Coates et al., 2007). Respondents were asked to recall these experiences for the week prior to the interview. Questions 2 and 4 of the HFIAS questionnaire inquire about the consumption of non-preferred and undesirable foods. Question 2 asks, "Were you or any household member not able to eat the kinds of foods you preferred because of lack of resources?" and Question 4 asks, "Did you or any household member have to eat some foods that you really did not want to eat because of a lack of resources?". The data were analysed using both descriptive statistics and multivariate probit models. The models were run in R using the mvprobit codes.

Results	*100 – 250 words*

Many of the respondents are engaged in farming as their main occupation, which is the main source of living for 88% of the respondents. Income levels are generally very low and respondents have few assets. Data shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents in our sample reported consuming non-preferred and undesirable foods in the month prior to the survey; 81% and 82% of the respondents reported to resort to foods they did not prefer or were undesirable, respectively. We also find that the dietary patterns of the households with food agency who can avoid non-preferred and undesirable foods in our sample is more diverse in terms of food groups consumed compared to the households lacking food agency. When we compare responses to the question non-preferred and undesirable food consumption to the other food security domains, we find that almost all households lacking food agency struggle with the other food access domains measured by the HFIAS questions.

The results of the multivariate probit analysis are consistent with the descriptive analyses, indicating that higher off-farm income and owning more assets are associated with a decreased likelihood of consuming non-preferred and undesirable foods. Additionally, households with livestock ownership, which is a valuable asset in

the region and source of food and fertilizer, are less likely to consume non-preferred and undesirable foods. The multivariate probit models also suggest that the consumption of non-preferred food and undesirable food is correlated.

Discussion and Conclusion	*100 – 250 words*

In our sample population, income levels and overall livelihood standards significantly influence the consumption of non-preferred and undesirable foods. Especially lower-income households and those with limited assets reported to consume foods they would otherwise avoid if they had the choice. This behavior is closely tied to the financial constraints and restricted economic access to food within the households in our study area.

A particularity of our sample is the importance of subsistence farm production in the respondent's households. Most of the produce of the respondents consists of staple foods like beans, cassava, sweet potatoes, and some maize. There is generally a limited supply of non-staple vegetables, fruits are scarcely available, and animal-sourced foods are extremely rare. Cereals and tubers are consistently and widely consumed across households, likely due to their cost-effectiveness and higher caloric content relative to nutrients. It is therefore, probable that low-income households prioritize these foods for sustenance, albeit reluctantly. Only few households that report some off-farm income can afford the foods they truly prefer.

Understanding the dynamics of food agency holds importance in assessing food security. Households facing other food insecurity domains in the HFIAS often consume foods they would typically avoid if they could afford doing so. Consequently, consuming foods they would rather not eat is an initial coping strategy when facing hunger and food insecurity. Our research emphasizes the crucial need to integrate considerations of food preferences and choices into the development of effective food interventions.

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