

FOOD CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

K.T. Silva, T. Kamalathne, E. Lokuge and S. Wattagama

*Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya
University Health Centre, University of Peradeniya*

Introduction

Globalization is a worldwide process that affects trade, information flow, technology transfer, and population movements in and out of all countries in the world. On the one hand it can be seen as a dynamic integrative process that unifies the entire world irrespective of the size, location and level of economic and social development in each country. On the other hand, it can be seen as a polarizing process where the rich and the poor get separated out in consumption, lifestyle, outlook and patterns of social and spatial mobility like never before. "Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health", the report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) commissioned by the WHO, has identified globalization as a key social determinant of health in the modern world affecting mobility, life style, food consumption, morbidity pattern, and help seeking pattern.

The overall objective of this study was to assess the impact of globalization on food consumption behavior of undergraduate students in a Sri Lankan university, their current and prospective health risks and help seeking behavior. In this study

globalization is understood as a social determinant of both health and ill-health of the university student population.

Methodology

In order to explore the food consumption pattern, and health seeking among university students this study utilized a series of qualitative research techniques. The following specific procedures were used in the collection of information in this study.

Review of secondary data.

The secondary data on student intake in the university by Faculty, records of health authorities in the University for a number of recent years and sales information in selected food outlets in the university were examined in order to understand overall trends in student population, their consumption and health seeking behavior.

Focus Ethnographic Research

In this study primary data was collected about undergraduate students in selected Faculties of the University of Peradeniya using a combination of qualitative tools. The focus ethnographic research involved the following procedures:

a. Mapping and listing of all food providers catering to university

undergraduates.

b. Key informant interviews with student leaders, health officials, university administrators, food caterers and other relevant persons.

c. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with selected male and female university students in the Faculties of Arts, Science, Medicine and Engineering. Students from four of the Eight Faculties in the university were selected in order to make sure students from diverse backgrounds and diverse disciplines were included in the study and at the same time data collection was manageable given the time frame and resource availability for the study. FGDs were conducted by trained sociology special degree students who were majoring in the medical anthropology programme. Each FGD involved 4 to 10 students from a selected faculty and selected year of study.

e. Content Analysis of Food Advertisements and Cooking Demonstrations in TV and selected newspapers.

f. Case studies of diet related obesity among university students.

Results

In this study we identified four food procurement patterns among the university undergraduates. As the type and quality of food eaten, the influence of globalization processes and the resulting health risks varied substantially according to the food procurement pattern used, we examined each procurement pattern in detail using the FGD strategy. These patterns included eating canteen food, eating food from private restaurants outside the university, cooking their own meals, and bringing home cooked

meals by day scholars who commute to the university on a daily basis. Of course a combination of food procurement strategies was pursued by many students who tried to optimize the benefits of different procurement patterns depending on their study programmes and personal circumstances. For instance, those who did their own cooking during much of the semester opted to eat canteen food during examination times in order to save time and perform better in the examinations. Similarly those relying primarily on canteen food occasionally patronized the private caterers and restaurants from time to time to break the monotony of their meals and obtain richer foods particularly on special occasions.

The impact of globalization processes on the various outcomes was found to be uneven between boys and girls, between students in different Faculties and different media of instruction in the Arts Faculty and between often politically active raggers and anti-raggers with a more favourable outlook regarding globalization in general. While identifying the globalization processes as a social determinant of health as pointed out in the report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) published in 2008, the study found both negative and positive health outcomes of parallel processes as far as the health (especially chronic disease) risks of university undergraduates were concerned. A number of factors served to insulate university students in Sri Lanka from the fast food culture rapidly spreading among college and university students throughout the world. In the first place the commercial food outlets were not

allowed to enter the university campuses by the regulated food provisioning permitted in the public universities under state control.

The anti-privatization orientation of the student politics too seems to have reinforced this situation. Given the limited purchasing power of most students in the public university system, it was not possible for global food chains to reach out to these university students in spite of them (e.g. KFC and Pizza Hut) being present in the nearby Kandy town. The situation however is by no means satisfactory due to serious problems in the canteen system and alternative means of food provisioning currently operating in the university. The remedies proposed for promoting healthy eating among the university students include facilitating cooking among the students, awareness raising about nutrition, physical exercise and ways of preventing the onset of chronic disease in later life by introducing relevant courses and relevant programmes in the University Health Centre, Physical Education Unit and Student Welfare programmes.

References

- Hawkes, C., (2002). Marketing activities of global soft drink and fast food companies in emerging markets: a review. In: Globalization, diets and non-communicable diseases. Geneva, World Health Organization.
- Silva, K.T., Sivayoganathan, C. & Schensul, S., (1998). Peer culture and the social context of love and sex in a sample of university students in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences 1998 21 (1& 2): 59-82.

WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) (2008). Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on social determinants of health. Geneva: WHO.