

The Social Life of Maize: Neo-liberalism, Food Security, and Non-market Exchanges in Southern Zambia

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores how a shift to neo-liberal agricultural policies has affected the non-market distribution of maize in rural southern Zambia. Maize serves as the staple food and primary source of income for the semi-subsistence agrarian population of this region. A shift to neo-liberalism introduced a dynamic market price to maize and led to the proliferation of non-market exchanges of maize, including bartering for goods and labor exchanges. Drawing on ethnographic research and the theoretical insights of the *social life of commodities*, this paper demonstrates how embedded systems of non-market maize exchange are differentially mediated by market pricing. The paper argues that developing systems of non-market maize exchanges through culturally defined practices can insulate maize exchanges from the effects of the market and can improve a person's food security. Recognizing the interrelationship between policy change and culturally mediated practices of maize exchange demands a new approach to food security policies in the region.

Key words: food security, non-market exchange, embeddedness, neo-liberalism

INTRODUCTION

Freedom from hunger is recognized as not only a basic human right, but also as a principle foundation from which economic and social development occurs (Sen 1999). People without sufficient access to food are denied the capacity to participate in economic life, suffer from high levels of mortality and morbidity, and are limited in their ability to plan for the future. Without these basic capabilities, people who suffer from chronic food insecurity find themselves in a cycle of hunger, poverty, and disease that is extremely difficult to escape. In rural southern Zambia, 42 percent of the population suffers from chronic food insecurity (Kapungwe 2005). Food insecurity occurs seasonally for most