



Children's Participation In *Khat* Production In Mbeere: Drivers, Consequences And Remedies

Faith Mukami Ngari^{1*}

Karatina University, Kenya

^{1*} fngari@karu.ac.ke



*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Khat is grown for the production of young tender twigs which are chewed for their stimulating effects. For a very long time, *khat* production has been taking place in the Nyambene hills, North East of Mount Kenya. Currently, the *khat* industry is no longer the sole preserve of the Meru. Rather it has become a multiethnic phenomenon; as *khat* plantations have sprung all over Embu County. Its consumption too is on the increase. Because of this, the marketing and distribution is sufficiently flexible to allow a large number of people to engage in the business and make a living from *khat*, thus the children have not been left out. *Khat* requires very frequent harvests and this therefore, calls for adequate labour so that it can be picked, packaged and transported very fast hence the involvement of children in its picking. Although children are expected to work within the family setting where they assist with the household chores and farm work as a way of socialization, concerns have been raised over primary school children's participation in *khat* production. On one hand, their participation helps to uplift the household economy while at the same time affecting their education. This is a review paper that describes the push and pull factors responsible for children's participation in *khat* production and the consequences of their involvement. Going forward the paper suggests measures to safeguard children from the identified adverse consequences of their involvement.

INTRODUCTION

Khat is an evergreen shrub that can grow to a tree size (Karch, 2001). It is grown for the production of young leaves and tender twigs which are chewed for their stimulating effects (Aune and Feyisa, 2003). *Khat* can reach 25 metres in height when growing naturally, but it is kept under manageable height when grown as a cash crop and for home consumption (*Ibid*). Karch (2001) observes that California appears to be the only area where *khat* is grown outside the African Continent. *Khat* is native to the sub - Sahara region and is cultivated on the mountain slopes of Yemen, where its use is endemic (Karch, 2001). Karch indicates that *khat* has been grown for centuries in the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa. Aune and Feyisa (2003) observe that the major areas where *khat* is produced are Madagascar, South-West Arabia, Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, South Africa and Kenya.

For a very long time, *khat* production has been taking place in the Nyambene hills, a mountain range lying to the North East of Mount Kenya (Carrier, 2006). The Nyambenes are home to two sub-groups of the Bantu speaking Meru: the Tigania and Igembe. Members of both sub-groups cultivate *khat*, although the Igembe cultivate it more intensely because their region is more conducive to its cultivation (Carrier, 2006). Currently, as Anderson *et al.*, (2007) observe, *khat* industry is no longer the sole preserve of the Meru. Rather it is becoming a multiethnic phenomenon; as *khat* plantations are springing all over Mbeere and Embu (currently referred to as Embu County) and its consumption is on the increase (Anderson *et al.*, 2007). Because of this, the marketing and distribution is sufficiently flexible to allow a large number of people to engage in the business and make a living from *khat*.

Unlike coffee or cereals, *khat* has no definite harvest time. Carrier (2006) observes that farmers appreciate the frequent harvests that *khat* trees provide every few weeks or so depending on the season. *Khat* cultivation is growing to be one of the most profitable farm activities since it needs little, if any, spraying or fertilizer. In addition, Riungu (2006) observes that there are no value adding costs since it is consumed fresh and no sophistication packaging usually associated with modern consumer goods is required. *Khat* is highly perishable and its consumption must take place at least 96 hours or 4 days after it is picked from the tree. This therefore, calls for adequate labour so that it can be picked, packaged and transported very fast hence the involvement of children in its picking (Carrier, 2006).

Although children are expected to work within the family setting where they assist with the household chores and farm work as a way of socialisation (Kayongo-Male and Walji, 1984; Kayongo-Male and Onyango, 1991) concerns have been raised over children's participation in *khat* production and its educational consequences. This research paper therefore describes the pull and push factors for children's participation in *khat* production and the consequences of their involvement. It also suggests the way forward to safeguard children from the adverse consequences.





MATERIAL AND METHODS

The Mbeere dry lands of Embu County

Mbeere District (which was split to Mbeere North and Mbeere South District) is located in Eastern province of Kenya and lies between Latitudes $0^{\circ} 20'$ and $0^{\circ} 50'$ South and Longitude $37^{\circ} 16'$ and $37^{\circ} 56'$ East. The District was carved out of Embu District in 1996 (Gachimbi *et al.*, 2007). The District covers a total area of about 2092.5 Km² (Republic of Kenya, 2005) and it has four divisions namely Gachoka, Siakago, Evurori and Mwea (Gachimbi *et al.*, 2007). Gachoka is the largest Division in the District while Siakago is the smallest. The District borders Embu District to the Northwest, Tharaka District to the North, Mwingi District to the East, Machakos District to the South and Kirinyaga District to the West (Republic of Kenya, 2005). Mbeere District hosts the famous seven folk's dams which include: Masinga; Kamburu; Gitaru; Kindaruma and Kiambere. The natives speak Kimbeere language.

The soils in the District are variable and are generally low in fertility. Soils in the middle of the District are well drained, very deep to dark red friable clay (nito-rhodic Ferralsols, rhodic Ferralsols). A major part of the district is covered by well drained, shallow to very deep, dark reddish brown to yellowish brown, loose to friable, loamy sand to sandy clay loam, in places that are rocky and stony (Ferralic Arenosols; with orthic Ferralsols and Acrisols) (Jaetzold and Schmidt, 1982). The lower parts of the District, Mwea plains, are covered with black cotton soils of low to moderate fertility (pellic Vertisols).

Mbeere District has a lot of potential for farming but the major constraint is water (Gachimbi *et al.*, 2007). The Land Use Change: Impacts and Dynamics (LUCID, 2006) working policy brief number 1 of Mbeere District indicates that the land has low productivity due to crop loss to pests, diseases and low rainfall and this explains the growing of the food crops that are resistant to drought. The farmers in the area grow maize, beans, millet, sorghum, finger millet, cowpeas, pigeon peas and black peas. Mangoes are also common in the area (Mukami, 2014). The occupants of the area also diversify their food and income sources by selling fuel-wood and charcoal (LUCID, 2006).

Mbeere District has come to be known for *khat* production and is the second largest producer after Meru (Thatiah, 2007). Mukami (2014) observe that the acreage of the *khat* plantations vary from one farmer to the other. In some cases, it is determined by the size of a person's piece of land and whether someone is growing other crops apart from *khat*.

Various activities with regard to *khat* production

Most of the activities involved in *khat* production include: land preparation, where bushes are cleared and the land where *khat* is to be planted is dug; preparation of nursery for the *khat* seedlings and planting the seedlings in the nylon paper bags; digging of the holes where *khat* seedlings are to be planted; transporting the *khat* seedlings from the nursery to where they are to be planted; planting the *khat* seedlings (Mukami, 2014); watering the *khat* seedlings; weeding the *khat* plantations; pruning of the *khat* shrubs; spraying the *khat* shrubs; picking of *khat*; packaging of *khat*; transporting *khat* bundles to the market and selling *khat* (Mukami, 2014; Ngeranwa, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). Children in most cases are involved in picking, watering-during the dry seasons- and in cultivation of their own *khat* shrubs on their parents' farms (UNESCO, 2013; Mukami, 2014; Ngeranwa, 2013). There are also children who apart from working in the family farms, they also work in their relatives and the neighbours' *khat* farms.

The Drivers

One of the major factors that drive the children to participate in *khat* production is money (UNESCO, 2013): money for the family use and money for the children's own use (Mukami, 2014). Those children who participate in *khat* production to earn money that is used to cater for the family needs points out that such money is usually given to parents or guardians, especially to the females - mothers or grandmothers, who in turn use it to take care of the household needs. They buy household items such as sugar, flour, rice, cereals, salt among other food items that are consumed by all the family members. In addition, the money that children earn for their own use is used to buy *ngumus* (doughnuts), sweets, biscuits, clothes, shoes, lotions, bread, and socks among other things (Mukami, 2014). The children also use the money to buy snacks during the school sports and music days and even to pay for the school tours. Closely related to money is the prevalence of poverty in Mbeere which also drives the children to participate in *khat* production. (Mukami, 2014; Ngeranwa, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). Some families are too poor such that even the children's basic necessities are not provided for. This therefore, pushes the children to participate in *khat* production activities to ensure that the monies they obtain are used to meet the household needs and some of the primary school expenses (Mukami, 2014). Further, those orphaned as a result of HIV/AIDS or any other factors are also pushed to participate in *khat* production to fend for themselves and for their siblings (UNESCO, 2013).

Mukami (2014) points out that peer pressure too is a factor that drives children to participate in *khat* production. In most cases the boys are enticed by the items that their friends own who participate in *khat* production activities. Such items include radios, watches, television sets, good clothes and shoes among others. The boys who initially didn't participate in any *khat* production activity eventually starts engaging so as to earn money to buy the items just like the friends who initially used to participate. Both boys and girls participate in *khat* production so that they can 'fit in,' this



means that if a child's friends are participating in *khat* production, one also gets involved so that they can feel that they belong.

Parental neglect is another factor that drives children to participate in *khat* production (Mukami 2014; UNESCO, 2013). Most of the parents do not monitor their children as expected and that is why they do not reprimand them when they go for *mukeyi* without their permission and in the absence of their supervision. In addition, the same parents ask for the children's help in the *khat* production activities knowing very well the dangers it poses to their accessing quality education. UNESCO (2013) additionally indicates that the men in Mbeere-in the *khat* growing areas- have neglected their families as they engage in the consumption of illicit liquor which is bought with *khat* proceeds.

The children are also driven into *khat* production in a bid to help their parents/guardians (Mukami, 2014; Ngeranwa, 2013). Children in most cases are asked to help especially when there is in-adequate labour- especially during the rainy season. The children willingly respond to the call because they are of the opinion that the money that will be obtained after selling the *khat* will benefit the entire family and will also be used to cater for some of their personal and school needs (Mukami, 2014). It's also very difficult for the children to turn down the request to help from their parents/guardians, relatives and older siblings. This is attributed to obedience being a virtue that is emphasised in schools and also in the churches; and therefore the children practice it even with regard to *khat* production. In addition, the obedient children always gain favour in the eyes of the parents and such no child want to lose.

Mukami (2014) indicates that coercion also drives children to participate in *khat* production. Some children are involved against their wish. Their parents demand that they must participate especially in picking. This is because the parents do not want to hire people to pick locally referred to as *makanga* since they want all the proceeds from *khat* to remain within the family. On the other hand, some of the children find *khat* picking a pleasurable activity and that is why they join the *makanga* picking in their homes. They view the activity as interesting (*ibid*).

Lastly, children are driven to participate in *khat* production because they want to emulate the *khat* dealers (Mukami, 2014; UNESCO, 2013). Most of these children have the *khat* dealers as their role models. The children are of the opinion that some of the *khat* dealers are economically well off than the people who are in formal employment such as teachers, nurses and doctors among others. They argued that the *khat* dealers have good houses and vehicles which they admire (Mukami, 2014). Thus, the admiration causes some of the children to drop out of school to fully participate in *khat* production activities.

RESULTS

Consequences School Attendance

Children's participation in *khat* production affects the school attendance negatively due to absenteeism (Mukami, 2014; UNESCO, 2013). *Khat* picking and watering are the two major activities that are responsible for the children's absenteeism from school. *Khat* is usually picked on a regular basis as it sprouts very fast. The picking usually is done very early in the morning from as early as 4 O'clock since *khat* should reach the market as early as possible. Watering on the other hand is purely done during the long dry seasons by children either in the evening after school or during the weekends (Mukami, 2014).

The absenteeism is usually noted in the primary schools for both girls and boys. Mostly, the children fail to go to school when they finish picking *khat* very late such that they have little time to prepare for school. During the rainy season *khat* sprouts well hence a lot of labour is needed thus the involvement of children to make the picking faster. At times these children end up not going to school while others arrive in school very late. Secondly, when the children are woken up very early in the morning to pick *khat*, they sometimes feel too tired after the whole exercise and they end up not going to school. Lastly, during the dry seasons children fail to attend school so that they can water *khat* since during the dry period it doesn't sprout very well thus necessitating the watering. The girls are sometimes asked to remain at home to take care of the little siblings as women and men go to sell *khat*. Therefore, the failure to attend school to participate in *khat* production affects the children's school attendance.

School Performance

Children's participation in *khat* production affects the school performance negatively. (Mukami, 2014). There are several factors which when combined affect the children's school performance.

Firstly, watering *khat*-especially in the evenings- has adverse effects on the children's performance in schools (*Ibid*). This is because watering is done until it is dark and therefore the children do not have time to do personal studies in the evening. In addition, even when they finish early, they are so exhausted at the end of the activity hence they are not able to concentrate when doing their personal studies or even while doing their homework (*Ibid*). Doing the homework in the morning also is a challenge because some of the children wake up to pick *khat*. The failure to concentrate effectively on their homework and personal studies is what contributes to poor performance (*Ibid*).

Secondly, some children doze in class as the sessions go on. This is as a result of waking up as early as four O'clock. They are "present but absent" (Mukami, 2014). Such children do not perform very well in school because most of the lessons come to an end while they are still dozing. Thirdly, keeping money earned from *khat* production by the children also lowers their concentration in class (*Ibid*). These children are very eager to spend the money and hence



look forward to break time so that they can buy *ngumus* from the nearest canteens. They also look forward to the close of school for each day so that they can spend the money while heading home. The children wait for any chance to show to their friends the amount of money they have in their possession, and this leads to anxiety during class hours (*Ibid*).

On Friday afternoons the children, and especially boys, find it difficult to understand what the teacher is teaching because they are usually distracted. The distractions are caused by thoughts such as where they will go to pick *khat* the following day (that is on Saturday morning) (*Ibid*). On the other hand, the children who own some *khat* stems are also distracted while in class. Such children fail to concentrate wondering how much money the *khat* that was sold from their portions fetched and on such days they are usually eager to go home (*Ibid*).

All these distractions that have links to children's participation in *khat* production lead to lowering their concentration in class and thus contribute to poor performance. Etsey (2005) observes that children need a stable frame of mind to enable them concentrate on learning and to improve their output.

Further, the language used in the process of *khat* picking is usually vulgar and the *makanga* fights often even in the presence of the children. The children eventually adopt the vulgar language and the fighting habits which they eventually take to the schools (Mukami, 2014). High indiscipline cases are consequently noted in the schools especially among the children who involve themselves in *khat* production activities specifically picking. The schools are, however, governed by norms and values and failure to adhere to them calls for punishment. This therefore, means that the children who are caught very often, for instance, fighting or using vulgar languages are usually punished. Children who spend so many hours in punishment are unlikely to perform well in school (*Ibid*).

Though children's lateness for school while picking *khat*, absenteeism and irregular attendance to pick, to water *khat* or to baby sit as the parents go to sell is mostly perceived to affect school attendance, it also contributes to poor performance. This is because the teachers continue in the coverage of the syllabus in the absence of the pupils. What the teachers cover in the absence of the pupils is never repeated and therefore such pupils lose in terms of what is taught. Etsey (2005) asserts that lateness, absenteeism and irregular school attendance makes what is taught by the teachers in the absence of the pupils difficult to understand when children study on their own. He argues that continued missing of classes also results in loss of content and knowledge. This is where children lose in terms of what is taught. The result is that assignments and exercises are not done properly and correctly. The consequence at the end is usually low academic performance (*Ibid*).

Retention rates

Cases of children dropping out of school to participate in *khat* production are evident in Mbeere (Mukami, 2014; Ngeranwa, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). Some children drop out of school because they are brainwashed to think that participation in *khat* production is better than education. They look at the immediate benefits of participating in *khat* production as opposed to the future long term benefits of education (Mukami, 2014). Some members of the community argue that children / people go to school so that they can be employed to earn money. Therefore, they argue that if one is able to obtain money through venturing in an activity apart from education, people should opt for it. It is in this line that some children drop out of school and venture in *khat* production (*Ibid*).

Peer influence also contributes to dropping out of school by the children. Those children whose friends drop out of school and engage in *khat* production are more likely to do the same since most of their discussions mainly centre on how much money those in school are losing (Mukami, 2014). Mwakugu (2007) indicates that in the *khat* growing areas, cases of boys dropping out of school are rampant. Boys in such areas choose to work in *khat* plantations or sell the stimulant instead of going to school because there they make quick money. The comparison between the immediate returns of *khat* and the long term benefits of education by the pupils influence some to drop out of school.

Further, some children think that because they have the little money from *mukeyi*, they are 'mature' and therefore they do not see the need to go to school. They drop out of school and start living independently so that they can control their own lives. Girls on the other hand, drop out of school to get married to people in the *khat* business as they are considered to have a lot of money which is/will be used to meet their needs (Mukami, 2014).

Khat Income and effective Learning

Though Children's participation in *khat* production is mostly associated with negative consequences, Mukami (2014) observes that in some limited cases it is advantageous to some of the children who would have otherwise been locked out of the school system. This is because, despite the fact that Free Primary Education is offered in Kenya, parents are expected to cover certain costs of schooling such as buying of school uniforms, paying for the meals for the children who eat in schools, buying desks or paying money to repair them and for meeting the cost of registering for Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examination (MOEST, 2003). In some cases, when parents are unable to meet such expenses their children are sent home (Suda, 2001). Some children who participate in *khat* production make their stay in school possible where they use the money they earn from *khat* production to pay for the school related expenses which as indicated above are not covered in the Free Primary Education. When the parents are unable to meet such costs, some children use their savings and pay for these expenses (Mukami, 2014). This ensures that they



are not sent home. ISCA (2003) also indicates that paid work can help children to realise their right to education by using the money they earn to pay for school fees or any other school related expense.

Participating in *khat* production enables the children to have money which they use to buy *ngumus*, *mandazi* and tea among other edible things as they head for school. This ensures that they do not go to school hungry. This is because; some parents do not prepare breakfast for their children as they concentrate on picking *khat* and going to sell (Mukami, 2014). Murphy (2007) points out that hunger impairs children's ability to learn as it reduces their concentration. Therefore children who have money earned from *khat* production cannot go to school hungry and hence are able to concentrate well in class.

DISCUSSION

Tying the loose ends

UNESCO (2013) cites that there are no systematic strategies that have been put in place to address the adverse effects of *khat* business on schooling in Embu County where Mbeere District is located. According to UNESCO (2013) the community cites five reasons that have made it difficult to put effective strategies in place. Firstly, support lacks from parents and the community because they have a high regard for this trade based on the high and regular earnings that are derived from it. Secondly, is due to the lack of interest in education in some parts of the community. Transacting in *khat* business does not require any special training and some members of the community consider the long duration of schooling as a waste of time. Thirdly, it is due to inadequate sensitization on the harmful effects of *khat*. Further, *Khat* business is a source of quick and easy money and any attempt to challenge the prevailing mindset on *khat* business encounters a lot of resistance and hostility from the community. In addition, support from law enforcers also lacks since *khat* is legal in Kenya and there is no clear policy on how children of school going age should be involved in the *khat* trade. Lastly, the church has been compromised hence they are not able to offer a clear direction since the church members too are in the business (*Ibid*).

This paper therefore put forward some recommendations which if put in place by the relevant stakeholders will ensure that the adverse effects that children's participation in *khat* production has on schooling are mitigated. Mukami (2014) recommends that mechanisms should be put in place by parents/guardians and the relevant stakeholders to ensure that most of the basic needs of the children are met. This is because most of the children participate in *khat* production to be able to meet/finance their own needs and those of the family. The mechanisms should be sustainable to avoid erosion of gains made by such interventions.

Secondly, parents should not involve their children in *khat* production activities. They should stop encouraging their children to participate. This they should do by stopping to ask for the children's help in any activity and they should also stop forcing their children to participate (Mukami, 2014).

The parents need to be sensitized on the long term future benefits of education, so that they can be empowered to effectively supervise and monitor their children's academics. This is because; some parents have neglected their responsibility to give guidance to the children which leave the children to do whatever they want (Mukami, 2014). Further, community based sensitization campaigns by local education authorities should target specifically children in order to develop positive attitudes towards believing in the long term benefits of schooling over the short term gains of participating in *khat* production during the time they should be concentrating on their schooling (*Ibid*).

The Ministry of Education together with the relevant stakeholders should come up with awareness programmes to mitigate the negative implications of children's participation in *khat* production (Mukami 2014; UNESCO, 2013). A successful intervention should result in the reduction of cases of absenteeism, dropping out of school and improved concentration in class leading to improved performance (Mukami, 2014). In addition, UNESCO (2013) suggests that role modeling and mentorship programmes should be put in place by prominent community members who have excelled in education and that legislation for controlling/regulating the *khat* business should be put in place by the Government Agencies involved in education.

The government, which has the sole responsibility to enhance law and order within the society, should be vigilant to discourage child labour. *Khat* farming and any other *khat* related commercial activity should be banned for minors (school going age) and surveillance of child labour for its eradication be done through the provincial administration hierarchy and heavy penalties should be administered on those found to encourage it (Ngeranwa, 2013).

Lastly, the government should come up with poverty eradication initiative through creation of alternative employment opportunities to *khat* farming. This can be done through providing subsidized irrigation water and in tandem introduce a variety of farming initiatives such as sericulture, horticulture, bee-farming, and dairying among others. Introduction of subsidized inputs as an agricultural initiative would encourage the folks to take up the new venture as an alternative to *Khat* farming (Ngeranwa, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper indicates that various factors influenced children's participation in *khat* production. Some of these factors include: money, poverty, peer pressure, parental neglect and coercion. Other children participate to emulate the *khat* dealers who act as their role models and others in a bid to help their parents. To some it is an interesting activity.





Children's participation in *khat* production to large extent has negative implications for schooling. This is because cases of absenteeism and poor performance are noted in schools. There are also cases children dropping out of school. On the other hand, participating in *khat* production is profitable since income from *khat* is used by some of the children and parents to meet school related expenses which are not covered by the Free Primary Education programme.

This paper therefore recommends that the parents and guardians should provide for their children's basic needs and that both the parents and children should be sensitized on the long term future benefits of education. The government too should be vigilant in discouraging the involvement of children in *khat* production. All these will work to ensure that the children concentrate well in school thus improving their performance.

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