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POLICY
BRIEFING

PUTTING INDIGENOUS FOODS AND SYSTEMS AT THE HEART OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN UGANDA

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Transformations in Uganda's food systems are posing increasingly significant challenges to the health and nutrition status of the population. These include the wide availability and consumption of highly processed, high calorie, high salt and low nutritional value food items; and the prominence given in agriculture to high-yielding food crops over resilient and nutritious traditional and indigenous species. Meanwhile crop losses due to climate change are exacerbating the country's food security situation. This paper highlights the key food and nutrition challenges facing Uganda, reviews the potential of indigenous foods in helping to address these challenges, and outlines the policy changes required to get there.

Key messages

- **Ensuring food and nutrition security in Uganda is an ongoing challenge.** Known as the food basket of East Africa, Uganda supplies 72% of the region's commodity exports. Yet, today 4 out of 10 Ugandans are not getting their required dietary intake: 16% of households are chronically undernourished and only 4% are food secure. At the same time, the proportion of overweight adults continues to grow. Since April 2019, the food security situation in Uganda has deteriorated in many parts of the country due to below-average first season rainfall.
- **The loss of biodiversity in Uganda continues apace.** Ranking among the top ten most biodiverse countries in the world, Uganda has a record 18,783 species of fauna and flora. While the country is committed to reducing and eventually reversing the rate of biodiversity loss,¹ it is estimated that it is losing about 10-11% of its biodiversity every decade. Many indigenous food varieties are also endangered. The losses are mainly due to deforestation, land-use changes and food production. Other reasons include climatic change, competition for land with commercial crops and neglect of traditional varieties.
- **Traditional and indigenous food systems are under threat.** The production and consumption of indigenous foods are declining due to the prestige associated with exotic modern foods, lack of consumer awareness of their health benefits, and lack of producer awareness of indigenous food markets. Genetic erosion of many indigenous species is occurring at an alarming rate as Uganda modernises its agriculture with an emphasis on exotic species and modern varieties.
- **The revival of indigenous foods and food systems can enhance climate resilience and address food and nutrition insecurity, micro-nutrient deficiencies and biodiversity loss.** The resilience and diversity of indigenous and traditional crop varieties and livestock breeds allow farmers to respond to climatic shocks and changes, and improve food and nutrition security, particularly for women and children who are most vulnerable to nutrition deficiencies.² Table 1 shows that indigenous foods tend to have higher content of essential nutrients than similar exotic ones.



Photo credit: Sweet potatoes, Joseph Muhumuza

Table 1. Nutritional values of selected indigenous and exotic vegetables (per 100g of edible portion)

Selected nutrients	Indigenous vegetables			Exotic vegetables		
	Amaranth leaves, raw	Spider plant leaves, raw	Black (African) night shade leaves, raw	Cabbage leafhead, white, raw	Spinach leaves, raw	Kale leaves, raw
Energy (kcal)	36	43	31	76	27	29
Protein (g)	3.7	4.8	3.8	1.1	2.8	3
Fibre (g)	7.2	4.3	4.3	2.2	4.1	4.7
Calcium (mg)	280	189	100	47	131	402
Iron (mg)	6.8	2.6	8.6	0.5	1.7	2.8
Zinc (mg)	0.92	0.76	0.65	0.2	1	0.5
Vit A (RAE)	326	186	2	tr	189	177
Food folate (mcg)	64	165	404	15	110	62

FAO/Government of Kenya. 2018. Kenya Food Composition Tables. <http://www.fao.org/3/I8897EN/i8897en.pdf>

Reviving Uganda's indigenous food systems

Much more needs to be done to promote the sustainable use of indigenous foods across different population groups in urban and rural areas of Uganda. Currently, there is limited research, agricultural extension support and political attention given to indigenous foods, their conservation, production and use. There is also limited awareness, especially among urban populations and the youth, of the role that these nutrient-rich foods can play in the health and nutrition status of the population. The potential of indigenous foods to address food and nutrition security, climate change and environmental challenges is largely unexploited due to lack of investment to improve yields and markets, and negative perceptions of indigenous foods as poor man's food.

Indigenous foods on the menu

A number of promising initiatives offer cause for hope in Uganda. Many business-oriented farmers are now cultivating indigenous and traditional crops in the urban and peri-urban areas of Uganda and selling them to urban dwellers, who are becoming more conscious of the health benefits of indigenous foods. Initiatives to raise awareness of indigenous foods and to make them a policy priority are also underway by Hivos' partners in the country. These include food change labs and food parliaments, bringing together mainstream actors and frontrunners to shape a more conducive policy environment for a more inclusive, sustainable, diverse, healthy, accessible and green food system. Thanks to partners' initiatives, some hotels in Fort Portal are now including indigenous foods in their menus and even setting aside a day per week where they only prepare and serve indigenous foods.



Photo credit: Amatehe, Joseph Muhumuza

The following recommendations could support the revival of indigenous food systems in Uganda:

1. Creating a more enabling policy environment

The government needs to take a strong leadership role on the indigenous foods and food systems agenda, so that funding for such programmes becomes a priority. The ministries of agriculture, health, education and trade should take the lead, alongside line agencies and departments and local government. Most importantly, different levels of government must work together - rather than in siloes - to take the following actions:

- a. *Implement existing policies that promote indigenous foods, food systems and knowledge* - for example, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan and the Uganda Nutrition Action Plan. There should be a review of policies that promote the commercialisation of exotic crops and monopolisation of seed systems by private seed companies at the expense of indigenous foods.
- b. *Enhance policy action for healthy food systems and diets* to promote local indigenous nutritious foods over processed and fast foods in view of the rising health sector burden, and to promote preventive care to improve national productivity.
- c. *Review land policies and land rights:* agricultural land fragmentation is affecting farming systems (both indigenous and modern) and loss of land can affect indigenous food systems and nutrition.
- d. *Strengthen informal indigenous seed systems:* the lack of an effective seed system renders farmers' seed insecure, leading to inconsistent seed supply and ultimately to food and nutrition insecurity. Actions include recognising the value of indigenous seed systems, linking indigenous and formal seed systems for mutual benefit, promoting community seed banks and seed exchanges, and protecting farmers' rights to seeds.
- e. *Invest in participatory research and development of indigenous crops and livestock:* this is a vital weapon in the continuing battle against poverty and hunger alleviation, for the reversal of agrobiodiversity loss, and for adaptation to climate change.

f. *Increase awareness among agricultural extension workers* of the importance of indigenous foods. Currently they seem to discourage farmers from nurturing indigenous foods (especially vegetables), possibly driven by the government's agricultural commercialisation agenda.

g. *Invest in indigenous food processing businesses* and improve the marketing infrastructure for indigenous foods, while ensuring affordable financial and business services and market information systems. This should happen in collaboration with the banking sector.

2. Enhancing capacity and knowledge among actors and sectors

Development partners, civil society, research institutions (including academia), private sector entities and local governments should lead on the following:

- a. *Initiate multi-actor/sector collaborations* for indigenous food promotion and food system transformation across their value chains. Examples include Food Labs and Food Parliaments, which should be replicated as best practice initiatives developed by the Sustainable Diets for All programme.
- b. *Strengthen the role of the private sector*, including microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in key areas of indigenous food systems to stimulate innovation and interest by businesses.
- c. *Invest in communities and youth capacity* and tap into their innovation skills to improve production, value addition and marketing of indigenous foods, while working with SMEs and larger markets.
- d. *Invest in nutrient analysis of Uganda's indigenous foods* and use the evidence to create awareness. Integrate indigenous food systems into nutrition promotion programmes.
- e. *Invest in indigenous knowledge promotion and management*, including farmer-to-farmer dissemination and inter-generational transmission, to document this knowledge and reverse its rapid loss.
- f. *Provide communities with 'business-oriented' support* that is culturally and environmentally sensitive, to enable communities to preserve their indigenous food systems.



Photo credit: Joseph Muhumuza

3. Supporting bottom-up citizen action

Local governments and development partners located at community level, as well as community-based organisations, the private sector and cultural institutions, can take action as follows:

- a. *Encourage and support community efforts* to protect indigenous food and food systems, as well as local biodiversity, and to integrate indigenous foods into farming systems so that they are adequately used and conserved.
- b. *Support communities to play a key role in sensitising* young people on the value of indigenous foods and why they need to consume more of them.
- c. *Increase the voice of women and youth* in indigenous food systems promotion. They have the potential to rejuvenate food systems.
- d. *Provide a key leadership role to community elders* (and elderly members of the community) to disseminate knowledge and practices related to indigenous foods.
- e. *Promote local, traditional and indigenous methods of food production, processing and preservation*, encourage their continuation by communities and identify ways of improving them.
- f. *Ensure recognition of the importance of indigenous peoples' traditional cultures, food ways and knowledge* in which indigenous foods and food systems are embedded, and of the land and resource rights that sustain them.

About Sustainable Diets for All

HIVOS, IIED, Slow food Uganda, VEDCO Uganda, Kabarole Research and Resource Centre and the Food Rights Alliance are implementing the five-year (2016-2020) Sustainable Diets for All advocacy programme in Uganda, in partnership with and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sustainable Diets for All uses evidence, including evidence generated by citizens, to help the population improve access to sustainable, diverse and nutritious food. The goal of the programme is to work with citizens and partner organisations to influence policies, market practices, government actors and international institutions to promote diets that are diverse, healthy, fair and green.

In Uganda, the programme seeks to bring about policy change in three key areas:

- **Healthy and diverse consumption**
- **Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and informal market linkages**
- **Nutritious and diverse production, focused on preserving and promoting traditional varieties of foods and seed.**

www.sustainablediets4all.org

Authors

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Notes

¹ Pomeroy, D. Tushabe, H. and Loh, J. 2017. *State of Uganda's Biodiversity 2017*. National Biodiversity Data Bank. Kampala: Makerere University. https://www.dof.dk/images/naturbeskyttelse/international/dokumenter/BD_2017_Indicators_Report.pdf

² PELUM Uganda. 2016. *Indigenous Food Fair 2016 Report*. Participatory Ecological Land Use Management, Uganda. www.pelumuganda.org/download/report-on-the-2016-annual-indigenous-and-traditional-food-fair.