

# Participatory approach to improve dietary diversity in Vihiga County, Western Kenya

Julia Boedecker<sup>1</sup>, Francis Odour<sup>1</sup>, Céline Termote<sup>1</sup>, Gina Kennedy<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bioversity International

## Overview

This research examines the suitability of a community-based participatory approach for diversifying diets in Vihiga County, Western Kenya. It is part of the Humidtropics and Agriculture for Nutrition and Health CGIAR Research Programs.

## Methodology

The project consists of a diagnostic phase documenting agricultural biodiversity and nutrition (phase I), participatory development of activities to improve nutrition (phase II) and participatory implementation of the activities (phase III). This poster describes phase I and II. Phase I applied cross-sectional and longitudinal study designs. Data on agrobiodiversity, nutrition practices, anthropometry and dietary intakes was collected in 10 randomly selected sub-locations in Vihiga County. In each sub-location, 40 households with a child aged 12-23 months were sampled. After pair-matching, five of the ten sub-locations participated in phase II. Participatory workshops with 36 men and women in each of the five sublocations (180 participants in total) were carried out aiming to mediate basic nutrition knowledge, to discuss results of the diagnostic phase, including the potential of the local food environment for nutrition, and to develop community activities to increase dietary diversity.

## Local food biodiversity in Vihiga County



Fig. 2: Locally available foods in Vihiga County, demonstrated by the workshop participants.

Quotes by Beveling Malesi, one of the 180 participants in the community nutrition workshops:

“Through the workshops I have learnt many new things. Before, I did not know that a diverse diet is important for health.”

“We have improved eating at home, thanks to the workshops. We never ate fruits. As we did not know the importance of fruits we did not buy them in the market. Now we eat at least two types of fruits a day, for example banana and watermelon. I created a timetable to diversify food consumption at home. The food I eat today, I try not to eat tomorrow.”

“I did not know that some plants are actually foods, for example cassava leaves and passion fruit leaves. I also started to plant a vegetable, dania, as I have learned it is important and can also be mixed with other vegetables such as sukuma wiki (kale) or spinach.”

## Results

Vihiga County is rich in local food biodiversity (67 cultivated and 38 wild edible plant species). However, only 74.8% of children and 45.1% of women meet Minimum Dietary Diversity. Stunting affects 28% of children. To diversify diets, the workshop participants in all five sub-locations decided to plant traditional vegetables and legumes and to raise poultry. Community action plans were developed specifying how these activities are going to be realized. The participants also identified local funding mechanisms to finance their activities and developed a budget. It was observed that over the two months workshop period, trust was built between participants and researchers and that the groups developed ownership of their activities. Harmony within the group was a supportive factor for good performance.



Fig. 1: Vihiga county is located in the western region of Kenya. About 98.7 % of the land is under subsistence farming.

## Participatory community workshops



Fig. 3: Participants using food cards to learn about food groups and dietary diversity.



Fig. 4: The participants develop a community action plan for the activities they have decided on during the workshops: kitchen gardening and poultry keeping.

## Conclusion

A community-based approach in form of participatory workshops led to the successful development of community activities to diversify diets in Vihiga County, Western Kenya. Other similar projects in low-income countries stress the importance of community-based approaches in improving nutrition and livelihood outcomes.

The described participatory development of activities to diversify diets (phase II) was followed by the participatory implementation of these activities (phase III). A baseline and endline survey allow an outcome evaluation of the overall project. The data of the endline survey is currently analyzed.