



Photo: Cowpea leaves ready for harvest at St Mary's Mundika secondary school. Credit: BFN Kenya/A. Manjella

African leafy vegetables go back to school in Kenya



Biodiversity for nutrition and health in Busia County, Kenya

Nutritious and resilient African Leafy Vegetables are making a comeback in Busia County, Kenya, thanks to a pilot procurement scheme that is sending local, nutritious diverse crops back to school.

This initiative is developing markets and value chains for traditional crops by using them in school-feeding programmes. This win-win-win approach is increasing crop diversity in both diets and production systems, resulting in healthier people, healthier food systems and improved livelihoods.

Locally available nutritious diverse crops as a solution

Busia County, Kenya, is rich in biological diversity. It has a variety of agro-ecological zones suitable for growing a diverse range of plants and crops with the potential to meet nutrition needs and sustainably support agricultural productivity.

Yet people living in Busia County are among the poorest and most food insecure people in Kenya with poverty rates around 70% and two thirds unable to meet their basic food needs. 26% of children under 5 are stunted and 11% are underweight. At the same time obesity is on the rise, along with an increase in diabetes and high blood pressure.

Several challenges are affecting food production, including climate change, severe weather, changing land use, water pollution and soil erosion. Shifts in eating habits and preferences, and a lack of access to quality seeds, have left most communities relying on just a handful of food crops for their sustenance.

This has come with a decline in the production and consumption of traditional crops, including African Leafy Vegetables (ALVs), nutritious, weedy, semi-cultivated species adapted to local growing environments and more resistant to pests and diseases, requiring little management, pesticides and fertilizers.



Photo: Picking African Leafy Vegetables Credit: BFN Kenya/A. Manjella

Utilizing school-feeding programmes to address several challenges

A food procurement model approach between local producers and schools, carried out by Bioversity International with partners, is simultaneously addressing consumer demand and supply constraints linked to marketing traditional crops.

One farmer group began by supplying ALVs directly to St. Mary's School, Mundika, under a negotiated memorandum of understanding. The farmers grow the vegetables directly on school land reducing transport costs and food losses.

The agreement means that the school has a reliable and constant supply of quality African Leafy Vegetables while the farmers have a dependable buyer for their produce. The 400 students benefit by consuming a more diversified and nutrient-rich diet

through their school meal.

"There is nothing more important than seeing my pupils fed on a nutritious and balanced diet. This will improve their health and increase their academic performance and reduce absenteeism due to sickness and diet-related diseases." comments Mr Obonyo, School Principle, St Mary's School.

Additional benefits of having the vegetable plots on the school premises are the educational opportunities. Students are getting hands-on experience in growing and using local crops in food dishes, and learning about sustainable agricultural practices.

"Other schools in the area have shown interest in adopting this approach as they see that providing healthy balanced diets need not be expensive and can that barriers can be overcome. This reflects what we

have found in other project sites where we have carried out similar procurement schemes, such as in Brazil." explains Danny Hunter, Global Project Coordinator, Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition.

Since this initial success, training was provided to 25 farmer groups to build capacity to sustainably produce ALVs, while nutrition education activities were carried out to improve the capacity of schools and clinics to benefit from ALV consumption. Eight farmer groups have now signed contracts with 13 schools and 1 hospital for the provision of ALVs to be included in their institutional meals.

"Looking ahead, we are currently planning a workshop with stakeholders to roll out and test the procurement model in more locations in Kenya and to look at including additional countries, such as Tanzania and Ethiopia." concludes Hunter.



Photo: Cook serving cowpea leaves to the students
Credit: BFN Kenya/A. Manjella

Partners

The GEF 'Mainstreaming Biodiversity for Nutrition and Health' initiative is led by Brazil, Kenya, Sri Lanka and Turkey and coordinated by Bioversity International, with implementation support from the United Nations Environment Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

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