

## PROMOTING CONSUMPTION OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS VEGETABLES IN KENYA THE ROLE OF GENDERED KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION

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### Key policy and practice messages

- 1 Despite concerted efforts by researchers, consumption of African Indigenous Vegetables (AIVs) in Kenya is low.
- 2 There are no policies that have been formulated at county government nor national government level to promote production and consumption of domestic value chains including AIVs.
- 3 AIVs have the potential to improve meal security and food sovereignty in Kenya because they are already part of the meal cultures of the Kenyan people. However, this has to be supported by policies and strategies that enhance utilization of AIVs.
- 4 In Kenya, various factors influence consumption of AIVs. This brief adopts a gender perspective to explore two impeding factors: *knowledge* and *perception*. Improving knowledge and perception of AIVs may be a viable strategy to promote AIV consumption.
- 5 Research and strategies on food fortification can focus on AIVs to provide necessary micronutrients and phytochemicals for nutrition and health which would benefit communities' diet and wellbeing more generally. Strategies on specific varieties, that are less time-consuming, need to be implemented.
- 6 Reform food policies in a community-based and gender-equitable way by employing the concepts of 'Meal Security' and 'Food Sovereignty'.

### Meal Security and Food Sovereignty: Consumption practices of AIVs

For many years, Africans consumed edible leaves collected from the wild such as Spiderplant (*Gynan dropsis gynandra*), African Nightshade (*Solanum scabrum*) or Amaranths (*Amaranthus blitum*). Due to a number of fac-

tors including colonisation, these leaves were associated with poor people and primitive culture more generally. Recently, AIVs have been shown to have several benefits including: diversity in varieties; fast growth; the ability to withstand harsh weather conditions; to be inter-cropped with maize or other staple foods; containment of nutrients and phytochemicals. Further, they are an important part of Kenya's meal cultures and known to most of the ethnic communities.

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For many households in Kenya, a meal is still a regular occasion that brings together family and friends. Essen-



***AIVs on the market in Nakuru-Kenya***

tially, meal cultures contribute immensely to the food and nutrition security of households. ‘Meal cultures’ (Teherani-Krönner & Hamburger, 2014), meaning the cultural, social and gendered embeddedness of consumption in everyday life, are significant features of food and nutrition security. Food is never eaten raw. There are socio-ecological and cultural factors that influence meal preparation and consumption. For AIVs to become a meal, many resources are required: the raw materials, time, water and fuel among others. Knowledge as well as gendered food practices further influence consumption. Therefore, we suggest the narrative ‘Meal Security’ as an alternative concept to food security. Factors which promote meal security should be taken in to account when advocating for increased consumption of AIVs.



***Cooking of Jute Mallow (Corchorus Olitorius) in Kakamega-Kenya***

In Kenya, there are a number of policies in place targeting food security: The “National Food and Nutrition Security Policy” (FNSP) of 2011 which has been aligned with various articles in the Constitution of Kenya indicates Kenya’s commitment to the promotion of food and nutrition security. In spite of this, many parts of Kenya still suffer food insecurity as a result of natural phenomena, lack of

planning and inadequate commitment by the respective government departments to fully implement the FNSP. Further, the “Right to Food” has been implemented in 2010, securing that ‘every person has a right to be free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality’. This rights-based perspective is gaining global recognition as it places food security into context and relates it to societal factors like culture and access and control over resources. The right to food shares fundamental goals with the approach to ‘Food Sovereignty’, namely to focus on the social and power structures that shape the current food regime, such as gender relations. The framework of food sovereignty informs this policy brief as food and gender justice as well as the rights of people producing and consuming food are an integral part of the concept. Food Sovereignty “puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (La Via Campesina, 2007). We identify meal cultures as key parts of food sovereignty and call for broadening the debate on food and nutrition policies.

The challenges facing AIV consumption include negative perception as already described, lack of knowledge on AIVs and their preparation, scarcity of time, water and economic capacity to obtain AIVs and further resources for cooking. From a gender perspective, women make decisions on what type of food is eaten, they procure and prepare it. Women are the main decision-makers of what the family eats and how a meal is prepared. They select the ingredients, organize the cooking process and consider the preferences of family and guests. That is why they have agency and they need to be considered as active agents of a transformation towards an increasing AIV consumption. Activities that promote meal security and food sovereignty make them productive as they bring about own satisfaction and happiness of their families. Nevertheless, promotion of AIV consumption at the household level can imply an increased burden of women. Depending on variety and cooking technique, the preparation can be very time-consuming and can take up to three hours. This huge work burden is mainly put on the shoulders of women. Hence, gender relations and gendered tasks around meal work within the household have to be recognized as crucial for improving consumption. The government and other stakeholders should enhance their efforts to address those challenges and promote consumption of AIVs while appreciating the richness of women’s knowledge and agency.

## **Results**

A qualitative study conducted in rural (Kakamega), peri-urban (Nakuru) and urban (Nairobi) areas of Kenya between March 2015 and September 2016 set out to investigate promoting and restricting factors of AIV consumption. The research team conducted cook-along interviews,

participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The results revealed the following findings:

- Two basic interlinked factors that impact the consumption of AIVs are *perception* and *knowledge*. Positive perception of AIVs and use of knowledge about AIV species and preparation ultimately enhance consumption of these vegetables.
- The study reveals that the *perception* of AIVs is still negative with some consumer groups perceiving AIVs as ‘poor men’s food’ and as backward. This is very much rooted in the historical context of colonization when exotic and ‘modern’ vegetables such as kale and cabbage were introduced by the white settlers - thereby replacing AIVs. At that time, AIVs were not cultivated for commercial purposes and were not available at markets. They were largely gathered from the wild, which influenced people’s perception of AIVs as weed. Even though this perception is changing in many parts of Kenyan society, it is still dominant and exacerbated by lack of certified seeds for AIV production. There is hence need to improve the perception and image of local vegetables and to raise awareness of AIVs with respect to their nutritional benefits.

Some participants in the study, particularly in urban areas, mentioned that they have no *knowledge* on how to prepare the vegetables which leads to the choice not to consume them. Other participants who have the knowledge shared the same with friends or neighbors, for example by sharing recipes of varieties that are not part of their respective ethnic community. This sharing of knowledge about AIVs including the cooking techniques made them more food sovereign and diversified their diet. However, more needs to be done in order to empower consumers with knowledge on preparation and cooking of AIVs so as to diversify their consumption.

- While some communities opt for the bitter types of AIVs, some consumers, especially the young generation, dislike the bitter taste. Taste here is the meeting point of perception and knowledge. Some types of AIVs might be bitter but with proper cooking skills and experience in cooking even bitter AIVs can be cooked in a sweet way.
- Thinking about AIV consumption in terms of knowledge and perception is paramount because women hold the knowledge on AIVs’ utilization and they are well positioned at the household level to influence the family members’ perception of AIVs.

## Policy and practice recommendations

### Recommended steps in order to increase AIV consumption:

1. Women’s role in changing perception and knowledge diffusion about AIVs should be recognized and rewarded.
2. Change the negative perception of AIVs.
3. Providing requisite knowledge on respective AIVs.
4. Integrate concepts of Meal Cultures and Food Sovereignty into policy frameworks.



**Prepared meal of ugali and AIVs**

### 1. Women’s role in changing perception and knowledge diffusion about AIVs should be recognized and rewarded

- In order to improve the perception of AIVs and to increase the knowledge of AIVs it is a key issue to emphasize women’s role. Women hold the knowledge on AIV preparation and transmit it to family members. Therefore, they are key agents in changing both elements.
- The findings call for gender-just solutions and therefore it is recommended to promote consumption of AIVs across gender groups through enhanced sharing and dissemination of knowledge and information about AIVs. Women, men, girls and boys should be supported to gain and access knowledge on AIVs and their preparation. Considering that the preparation of AIVs takes time and competes with other domestic chores including reproductive duties, this might help to balance the chores among household members and to revalue domestic work.

### 2. Change the negative perception of AIVs

- In order to improve the perception of AIVs their benefits for health and nutrition need to be strategically advertised, advocated and recommended by stakeholders.
- The public and private sector should make deliberate efforts to come up with innovative AIV products in order to provide diversity and variety to choose

from, hence attracting those with negative perception. Involving the community and consumers, especially the young, in developing such new products is a key issue in order to assure that their preferences are being met.

### 3. Providing requisite knowledge on respective AIVs

- There is an urgent need to address and appreciate the cultural and social importance of agrobiodiversity in Kenya: Kenya's richness in agrobiodiversity needs to be emphasized and the seriousness of agrobiodiversity loss needs to be highlighted. Biodiversity fairs focusing on AIVs for stakeholders and community members could help sharing biodiversity-related information.
- Given the knowledge gap, the government and private sector may finance standardization of recipes for AIVs as well as strategies that can enhance dispensation of such knowledge, e.g. leaflets to accompany the AIVs at the point of sale. This will help to bridge the knowledge gap on preparation and cooking of AIVs.
- County and national governments are to consider AIVs in food policies with strategies that can enhance value addition, consumption and food sovereignty. Innovations that need to be developed community-based can also target decreasing time-consuming processes of preparation and cooking as well as preservation of AIVs. Food fortification might be one applicable strategy but needs to be carefully implemented while considering local knowledge and skills. This means that food fortification needs to be beneficial for the local community not the food industry, as the local community has the right to decide what they eat. Further, food fortification products should be accompanied by information on the history and meal cultures around AIVs to foster nutrition education and ultimately food sovereignty. Another applicable strategy might be to offer AIV species at the market that are harvested at a young stage (e.g. slender leaf). Consumers can benefit from this, as those leaves do not need to be plucked and can be prepared with the stem. Moreover, it reduces the cooking time as the leaves are still soft. Here too, a careful implementation is required, as this strategy might be less favourable for poorer households, as, compared to AIVs harvested at a later stage, a bigger bundle needs to be bought which is ultimately more expensive.

### 4. Integrate concepts of Meal Cultures and Food Sovereignty into policy frameworks

- Integrate the concept of Meal Cultures and Food Sovereignty into forthcoming policy frameworks by recognizing the importance of consumer rights and addressing their challenges. Communication and synergies between policy makers and the local community have to be ensured by initiating a participatory process of decision making. It must be the aim to reclaim food citizenship and the ability to shape the food system and its policy.

#### Further reading

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