

From research to action: collaborating with agropastoralist women in dryland Africa



Food festival participants.

Credit: Jamal Omar

“Together for Better Child Nutrition” was the motto of the NaviNut project and its final workshop held in Kenya. This trans-disciplinary research project, implemented in 2020–24 in Benin and Kenya, aimed to enhance women's agency in navigating their changing food environments to improve child nutrition in dryland Africa. It took a highly collaborative approach integrating the knowledge of agropastoralist women about caring for children with the knowledge of local food processors and community health workers in Benin and Kenya and the knowledge of African and German researchers in various disciplines.

Participatory innovation development
NaviNut used an action-oriented research approach, including participatory innovation development (PID):

the local women were co-researchers, taking active part in the PID and leading some activities. They exchanged their practical knowledge through food fairs, cooking demonstrations and peer-to-peer learning. The project sought to identify and build on women’s “positive deviance”: innovation by women who use local resources to feed their children better than other women with access to the same resources. The mothers documented their innovations in video films they made themselves with researchers’ support, using the “participatory video” technique.

The project also provided “action funds” for women's groups. The groups submitted proposals for activities to share their knowledge and expand their food production and processing initiatives to enhance child nutrition. A

committee composed of the research team and Kenyan fieldworkers in close contact with the groups evaluated the proposals according to criteria that the doctoral researchers had drawn up and communicated to the groups beforehand, and selected the projects to fund. With the funds, the groups implemented their own mini projects. In some cases, the researchers helped the women gain additional knowledge from established processors and public health departments on recommended practices or standards. The Center for Research and Development in Drylands (CRDD) also supported representatives from the groups to attend two trade fairs in Marsabit County in Kenya, which gave the women a chance to showcase their products, network and learn from other food processors.

International workshop in Marsabit

The NaviNut project culminated in the international workshop held in Marsabit in November 2024. On the first day, the researchers and the local women who were their research partners presented project outcomes to people from local government departments for health, agriculture, gender, culture and trade; from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs); and from Kenyan research institutions. Community health workers from several sub-counties also took part.

A doctoral candidate, Cherif Issifou, and his advisor, Waliou Amoussa Hounkpatin, explained how, in northern Benin, they and local women co-developed ways to assess the nutritional status of young children, building on the knowledge of expert mothers in recognising malnutrition in their children. Together with the women, the researchers compared the local assessments with nutritionists' standard methods. This collaboration led to setting up a community malnutrition-screening centre that applies the co-created knowledge. The researchers also presented nutritious child foods made by positive-deviant mothers who had well-nourished children despite having little money. The nutritional value of these foods had been confirmed by laboratory analyses.

Already on this first day, mothers from the various women's groups showcased the activities they had led. One pair of women told the workshop participants about a food fair they co-organised in Marsabit, followed by cooking demonstrations, which helped women in different agropastoral communities to learn about various locally made nutritious child foods and share their recipes. Another two women spoke about the interactive workshops where they, as experienced mothers, shared their knowledge with young mothers on childcare and nutrition, using self-made photographs as a learning tool (a technique called "photo voice"). They explained how these activities helped them gain new skills and confidence, for example, in using cameras and teaching others. The activities also strengthened social cohesion



Food festival presentation by Finhoracha Women's Group.

Credit: Jamal Omar

among group members and between different groups. The women showed some videos they had made to document their innovations. All of these presentations highlighted the women's valuable knowledge but also the importance that researchers invest time in building trustful relationships with local actors to ensure fruitful collaboration.

On the second day, the women featured even more prominently: in a colourful food festival, 15 women's groups, each represented by 5–6 members in their traditional dress and jewellery, showcased over 100 locally produced child foods, including products they developed together with the researchers and products they processed after receiving action funds. They clearly explained the key ingredients, recipes and innovations they had made. Between presentations, workshop participants – including the researchers from Benin, Kenya and Germany and the NaviNut donor representative from Germany – could taste the various foods, discuss with the women and learn more about the products.

In video films, the participants could see how the foods were produced and

the women's mini projects in processing food for sale. The films powerfully illustrated the women's motivation and efforts to expand their businesses and to improve child nutrition in their families and communities. In addition, videos made by the researchers were shown about some of the project's collaborative activities such as the knowledge-exchange sessions when the groups demonstrated their cooking. The local women and the other stakeholders at the workshop watched these films with great interest.

During the workshop, it became clear that NaviNut had truly contributed to enhancing women's agency. The activities in which women were engaging in their communities to improve child nutrition and childcare made a huge impression. The presentations and exhibits stimulated many inquiries and lively discussions among the diverse stakeholders. Participants from government offices and NGOs were particularly impressed by the activities led by the women and their peer-to-peer learning, and mentioned additional ways in which the women's groups could benefit and continue their activities:

Through the Council of Government and the Department of Trade, we are trying to ease this policy [constraining small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from selling in other counties] so that these nutritious foods will reach the last-mile vendors who are most critical in the food chain. We are also coming up with legislative frameworks such as the trade and investment policies we have in place, which I'm sure many people haven't seen.

– Participant from Ministry of Trade, Marsabit County

The government representatives encouraged the women to maintain ownership of their projects and to grasp existing opportunities, such as attending various fora, eg the investor forum, which would help them in networking and marketing their products. The representatives also spoke about government commitments to SMEs, especially those owned by women:



Stakeholder expressing appreciation of project.

Credit: Jamal Omar



Food festival exhibit by Nalokoile Women's Group.

Credit: Jamal Omar

I would like to thank you for coordinating the project and empowering our mothers. I would also like to share with you about our indigenous knowledge that is within us. It is us: it is our products that we carry. We make them within our surroundings that are reachable. And if you compare it to other products being sold in the supermarket or other markets, for us, [our products] will be even cheaper within our manyattas [villages]. Let me also share that the National Museum of Kenya, together with the County Government, has documented and digitised our indigenous knowledge, one area being food. The custodians are the Ministry of Culture, Gender and Social Service, but community elders are the ones accountable. This [NaviNut] has come at the right time because we see the value of nutritious foods and also foods that are within our reach.

– Participant from Social Department, National Government of Kenya

People from other projects also expressed interest in collaborating with the women's groups:

I'm a researcher from the Nawiri project. We're also supporting the organisation of mother-to-mother support groups. So I'm seeing an opportunity of experiential learning between the mother-to-mother support groups and the groups involved in this project.

– Participant from Catholic Relief Services nutrition project

Another key discussion point concerned gender roles and the support women receive from their husbands in childcare. Men were called upon to give more support to women in these activities so as to achieve better child health and nutrition outcomes:

So, the fact of the matter is, and it's known, women do a lot of work. And it's not just the issues around the children, but generally around keeping their households going. So, that gender support is quite important. But of course, there are cultural issues, a number of things that need to be understood ... And it cannot be forced, but



Two women representatives presenting to plenary.

Credit: Jamal Omar

somehow moulded in a way that people understand why certain roles are performed by this and by that – and how this can shift with time. We have seen shifts happen within our society. So, it's something that requires more conversations to keep it going.

– Participant from Social Department, National Government of Kenya

The direct interaction between the local women and other stakeholders during the workshop enabled the latter to comprehend the women's priorities and the significance of the action-research approach. It provided an opportunity for the stakeholders to correlate NaviNut's achievements with similar initiatives and to commit to incorporating lessons from NaviNut into their future development plans. The workshop was thus effective not only in disseminating the project's approach and results, but also in encouraging the integration of this approach into the regular work of the governmental and NGO partner organisations involved.

The project "Enhancing women's agency in navigating changing food environments to improve child nutrition in African drylands (NaviNut)", funded

by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL), was jointly implemented by organisations in **Kenya**: CRDD, Tropical Institute of Community Health and Development, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, and Prolinnova; **Benin**: University of Parakou and University of Abomey-Calavi; and **Germany**: South Westphalia University of Applied Sciences and German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL).

Patricia Kiprono

PhD student at DITSL with the NaviNut project

Brigitte Kaufmann

Research director at DITSL and NaviNut coordinator

Paul Jimmy Kouaté

Prolinnova coordinator in West & Central Africa

Ann Waters-Bayer

DITSL research associate and Prolinnova International Support Team member.

All photos by Jamal Omar.