

Local food fair for joint learning on child nutrition

By Patricia Kiprono, Brigitte Kaufmann, Hussein Wario and Ann Waters-Bayer*



Local food fair in northern Kenya.

In the drylands of sub-Saharan Africa, malnutrition is an issue of concern particularly among children under the age of five. Marsabit in northern Kenya – home to various pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities – has one of the highest levels of child malnutrition in the country. Numerous interventions by governmental and non-governmental actors have not significantly improved the situation. Yet many women in the Kenyan drylands possess rich knowledge of their traditional local foods, how they are prepared and for whom in the family and community, and the benefits of consuming these foods. Development workers seldom recognise or value this local knowledge. Their initiatives to improve child nutrition often focus on introduced foodstuffs that do not suit the context of the mothers in the drylands and are not easy for them to adopt. To be able to benefit and build on their knowledge in addressing child nutritional challenges, the women need opportunities to share and exchange their knowledge about child feeding with nutrition researchers and advisors as well as with women in neighbouring communities.

With this aim, a group of research and development partners in Benin, Germany and Kenya designed a project that brings together the knowledge of women in pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities and the knowledge of scientists from various disciplines who want to engage in joint research and action to improve child nutrition. The project is called ‘Enhancing women’s agency in navigating changing food environments to improve child nutrition in African drylands’, or NaviNut for short. In dryland areas of northern Kenya and northern Benin, it seeks to reinforce the role of local women in improving human nutrition and health and to strengthen their capacity to deal with rapid change in their environment. The idea is that new knowledge about better nutrition of children can be generated jointly by promoting exchange and learning among all concerned, regardless of their formal educational background.

Organising the fair

The research teams in Benin and Kenya organised food fairs where local women could showcase the various foods that

they prepare for their young children. The food fair organised by our Kenyan team was held in October 2021 in Marsabit, 530 km north of the capital Nairobi. It had three main aims: to showcase the variety of nutritious foods for children available locally, to promote exchange among women from pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities in order to stimulate learning and innovation, and – on the part of the researchers – to understand the mothers’ perceptions of the value of local foods given to their children.

The fair was organised by a committee made up of representatives of local pastoralist and agro-pastoralist women; people from local civil society organisations; staff members of local government departments for health, agriculture and gender; and the NaviNut–Kenya research team. This team had identified 13 women’s groups with different ethnic backgrounds (Borana, Burji, Gabra, Konso, Sakuye, Somali and Turkana) in different locations in northern Kenya that were interested in taking part in such a fair. The groups suggested where and when they wanted the fair to be held. At a mini food exhibition three weeks before the main food fair, each women’s group presented five of their local dishes to the food-fair committee. From each group, the committee selected 3–4 dishes to be presented at the fair. Some dishes were unique to an ethnic group, some were similar but prepared slightly differently, some were traditional and some innovative, that is, new to the local culture but developed by local women.

Presenting the dishes during the fair

To allow time for presenting almost 50 dishes, the fair was spread over two days. The prevailing Covid-19 regulations restricted the number of attendees: only 8–10 members from each women’s group could join the fair. The committee decided that the women would present each dish in turn at their own separate tables, instead of allowing people to mingle with each other while walking from one exhibit table to the next. Altogether, including the visitors from governmental and nongovernmental organisations and the general public, a

Credit: CRDD

total of 220 people attended the fair.

For each dish, the women described the ingredients they used, the preparation process, the benefits of the food and any innovations they had made. While one woman from a group was presenting, other group members carried around a sample of each food or drink for everyone to see. After 3–4 groups had presented, there was a session of food tasting by all participants. Women took the opportunity of these sessions to interact with other women from other groups to be able to learn more about their foods and how these are prepared.

Examples of local dishes

Among the foods that women in northern Kenya make for their children and presented at the fair were:

- **Shamure:** Somali dish made from dehulled boiled sorghum and meat cut in small pieces, fried in animal fat and onions
- **Ashir:** Sakuye dish made from dehulled maize that is boiled and mixed with boiled meat cut in small pieces
- **Matoke:** Gabra dish (soup) made from potatoes, pumpkins and green bananas that are boiled and mashed together
- **Qode:** Burji porridge made from sorghum, roasted groundnut and fenugreek, cooked in boiling water until it becomes a very thick



Women discussing child foods at the fair.

Credit: CRDD

porridge; it is mixed with milk when fed to a child

- **Alich:** Borana dish made from goat meat that is cut into very small pieces like minced meat and is fried together with spices and ghee; it is eaten with *anjera* (a pancake-like fermented flat bread)
- **Lakuli:** Turkana dish made from meat that has been cut into small pieces and boiled until soft; sheep's fat and salt are then added; this keeps well for up to two months
- **Karsha:** Konso dish made from wheat, beans and cowpeas, which

are boiled separately and fried together in cooking oil, onions and tomatoes.

The Borana women also presented milk as a food for children, often with other ingredients such as *fitoo* (fenugreek) added. Some groups also presented foods they had learnt about from other Kenyan communities such as the porridge prepared by Sakuye women; this is a mixture of maize, beans, groundnuts, cassava, sorghum, millet, *omena* (silver cyprinid or Lake Victoria sardine), milk, margarine and sugar.



Sakuye porridge.

Credit: CRDD



Konso karsha.

Credit: CRDD



More discussion.

Credit: CRDD

Women learn from each other

After the presentations, the researchers facilitated a final discussion session to give the women further opportunity to learn from one another about the different foods and other insights from the event. All women’s groups expressed immense satisfaction in having learnt so much about other local foods during the fair.

Some of the comments made by the women were:

- *“Personally, I do not like [omona] but I have now learnt that they actually promote brain development. I have already raised my children but, from today, I will pass by the market and buy omena so that my grandchildren can be smart and tomorrow they could be someone in the society such as the president of Kenya...”*
- *“We have been using cattle milk since our childhood, but adding “fitoo” is something we have learnt today and, given its benefits, we will add it to our milk and other products.”*
- *“Today we have learnt from the Burji that food we say is for cows*



Tasty & nutritious.

Credit: CRDD

and does not help us when the government gives it to us is actually a child food. Right now there is no milk, cows do not have milk, and that sorghum you can grind and it becomes a child food’.

The women greatly appreciated the space that had been created for them to meet and exchange with women from other groups. They were keen to learn even more about certain foods they had seen and tasted during the fair and

requested further opportunities for exchange. They were eager, after getting back home, to try to make some of the new foods that they had learnt about during the two days and also to share the information with their families, neighbours and friends. As an additional benefit, the women regarded the event as a good way to promote peace in Marsabit County, which is currently suffering from inter-ethnic conflicts.

Other stakeholders including researchers learnt a lot from the women such as the different preparations of certain foods and their benefits to a child's health and nutritional status. They also learnt from mothers about their local innovations regarding processing and preserving of some foods using local methods with locally available materials. Recognition of these innovations and women's local knowledge will be useful in developing nutrition education

materials and designing appropriate nutrition interventions.

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UNDP approves Prolinnova – Kenya's funding proposal

By Vincent Mariadho, Prolinnova-Kenya coordinator



Prolinnova Joe Ouko

In early 2022, Prolinnova–Kenya won a grant from the Innovation Small Grants Aggregator Project (ISGAP) of the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP). The 18-month project will focus on the local innovation developed by the small-scale farmer Joe Ouko*.

Credit: Joe Ouko

The aim of the project is to build resilience to climate change in the households of Nyando Community in Nyakach Sub-county of Kisumu County through increased dairy-goat husbandry, building on local farmers' own ingenuity.

Resilient food security and livelihoods

The project will support producers of dairy-goat feed in further developing, producing and commercialising the nutritious LOFODA-G-Meal in Kisumu County and beyond to contribute to more resilient food security and livelihoods.

It will help develop a sustainable social enterprise around this farmer innovation so as to strengthen also neighbouring households' alternative sources of livelihood by producing and selling dairy-goat feed composed of locally available vegetation.

The project will secure the right partnership with other actors to help the social enterprise to develop and fully commercialise LOFODA-G-Meal. This should strengthen the innovative and business capacity of the local community to continue to find ways to address the effects of climate change on their food system and their livelihood security. Moreover, the project will leverage on the LOFODA-G-Meal innovation to tap into other cases of local ingenuity that contribute to greater food and nutrition security in Kisumu County and beyond.

*LOFODA-G-Meal details: <https://www.prolinnova.net/content/farmer-innovator-joe-ouko-featured-webinar-%E2%80%9Chunger-justice%E2%80%9D>