

Final NaviNut workshop in Marsabit, Kenya

NaviNut (Enhancing women's agency in navigating changing food environments to improve child nutrition in African drylands) is a transdisciplinary research project initiated jointly by the German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Prolinnova International and partners from Benin and Kenya, with financial support from the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL). The transdisciplinary approach to co-creation of knowledge follows the same principles as the Participatory Innovation Development (PID) approach.

Starting in October 2020, the NaviNut project aimed to: a) understand the complexity and dynamics of women's decision-making in feeding their young children; b) contribute to the design of healthy food environments by increasing the accessibility and desirability of locally available highly nutritious traditional foods; and c) improve community health services by designing appropriate nutrition dialogue models that enhance women's learning about child nutrition. The project, originally planned to run from October 2020 to November 2023, was extended by one year with additional funding to disseminate the results of the research.

The closing workshop of the NaviNut project was held on 5–7 November 2024 in Marsabit in northern Kenya. Each of the three days focussed on specific activities: i) internal meeting to present the additionally funded activities; ii) mini-symposium with partners to present the project's transdisciplinary research approach and results; and iii) food festival and exhibition by the Kenyan women's groups involved in the project.

On the first day, the presentations of additional activities included: "Exchange visits and cooking demonstrations of local foods co-developed in North Benin" (Paul Jimmy); "Capacity building on hygiene and good production practices for local food processors in Benin" (Adrien Dogo); "The use of kitchen gardens and preservation of a variety of traditional vegetable types for child nutrition by women in northern Kenya" (Charles Wafula); and "Experiment to improve and finalise packaging design for improved local foods" (Ina Cramer). It was a very rewarding opportunity to share knowledge among the stakeholders directly involved in the project.

The second day was an opportunity to meet with government partners and organisations and other stakeholders involved in agricultural development, nutrition and health in Marsabit County. After welcoming remarks and an introduction by Hussein Wario, Executive Director of the Center for Research and Development in Drylands (CRDD), a representative of the health unit of the Marsabit County Government praised CRDD's involvement in the development of their community, in particular their research-based approach with stakeholders, unlike other intervention organisations that are often humanitarian in nature. Then Brigitte Kaufmann, DITSL Director of Research and NaviNut project coordinator, opened the series of presentations by giving a brief introduction on the project and its approach, emphasising the excitement and mutual encouragement that both the researchers and the local women participating in the project had experienced over the four years.

This was followed by presentations by members of the Kenya and Benin project teams on the place of the transdisciplinary approach in the project's activities, as well as the key achievements in terms of research results and their adoption/adaptation among the participating mothers. Among others, the presentation themes were: "Participatory video: capturing local innovations in childcare practices

and nutrition in Marsabit County” (Patrice Kiprono); “Capability of mothers in identifying and assessing nutritional values of frequently used child foods” (Caroline Musita); “From food fairs to knowledge exchanges: peer learning for better child nutrition” (Bardasso Jarso); and “Scaling NaviNut achievements through women-led initiatives: the case of radio and peer education programmes in Benin” (Georges Djohy). In the subsequent plenary session moderated by Hussein, the partners and other development stakeholders posed questions and made contributions, which led into a discussion to draw out lessons and knowledge concerning the project's approach and useful results. It was an opportunity for the representative of the County Government to connect the achievements of the project to similar initiatives and to make a commitment to take the lessons from NaviNut into account in future development plans. The session proved to be an effective way of sharing the project's results and approach with a view to institutionalising it within the partner organisations.

For the food festival and exhibition on the third day, around 20 women’s groups from different parts of Marsabit County came together to showcase their local foods, innovations and culture. Each group of women had the opportunity to share their experience of taking part in the project and to present their food and some stories about it. At the end of the session, participants shared lunch in a convivial atmosphere, accompanied by traditional music.

The three-day NaviNut closing workshop ended on a note of satisfaction for all those involved, with the fervent hope that the project's achievements will bring further benefits to the women directly involved in the project and to their neighbours in Benin and Kenya. It encouraged the partners in research and development in agriculture, nutrition and health to incorporate the transdisciplinary approach, which promotes the co-creation of knowledge with local stakeholders, into their practices with a view to ensuring a lasting impact of the development processes and interventions carried out in the field. This is the key to building local stakeholders' capacities and empowering them to take action to pursue their own development.