

Strengthening women's role and agency: Promoting women-led local innovations to improve child nutrition in African drylands



Women in the (agro-) pastoral dryland systems of Kenya are the primary caregivers, yet they remain marginalized, with their voices often unheard and their roles reduced to passive recipients of information and interventions. Despite this, they demonstrate remarkable resourcefulness, drawing on local knowledge and resources to support child nutrition in challenging environments, vital roles that are overlooked in policies and programs.



*Knowledge exchange
cooking demonstration
between two groups*
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WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Despite global and regional progress in reducing child malnutrition, it remains a significant public health issue in African drylands. In these regions, high rates of child malnutrition are driven by immediate, underlying, and structural factors—Including poverty, weak infrastructure, and climate shocks such as droughts.

Challenges persist as the numerous top-down interventions fail to consider local realities and women's contributions.

Yet, in the low-resource settings of Marsabit County, women continue to apply their intergenerational knowledge and innovations to promote child nutrition. Given their central role in child care and feeding, the NaviNut project engaged the women as key co-researchers recognizing them as both caregivers and food producers. Unlike top-down methods, we used a transdisciplinary research process which centered their voices, experience and knowledge in the research and co-innovation process.

KEY MESSAGES

- Women-led innovations were found central to improving child nutrition by making use of local foods and practices.
- Promotion of highly nutritious traditional food products through supporting local small & microscale food processors enhances children's diets and creates sustainable income possibilities mainly for women.
- Facilitating peer-to-peer learning promotes the exchange of practical local solutions to enhance child nutrition.
- Policymakers must recognise and support women's local knowledge and agency in nutrition strategies

NaviNut's Research Approach

The **transdisciplinary** research project (2020–2024) was implemented in Marsabit County, **northern Kenya** (working with Borana, Burji and Rendille ethnic communities) and in **northern Benin**, specifically Banikoara and Nikki districts.

The project began with an emphasis on **building trustful relationships** with the women. To achieve this, we held multiple informal engagements with them in their groups, homes, and community spaces.

Using different **participatory and engaging methods**, such as participant observation, photovoice, dramatised skits, and other techniques during focus group discussion sessions we gained insights into food environments, maternal knowledge, gender roles and child nutrition practices.

Additionally, to promote knowledge exchange and learning, other **participatory action research (PAR)** methods were employed, including:

- women-led **collaborative** activities, such as food fairs and cooking demonstrations
- **co-developing** nutritious traditional food products (TFPs) with the research team

Experienced and other innovative mothers were heavily involved in the **dissemination of locally adapted child nutrition and care** practices. For instance by:

- sharing of documented innovations via participatory videos created by knowledgeable mothers
- home visits by expert mothers to support young mothers with breastfeeding.



Women storyboarding during Participatory Video training . © Regina Jalle

Promoting local child food production

The project provided the women's groups with action funds following application and assessment, which they used to initiate or expand their local food producing and processing businesses, such as porridge mixes, baked products and other mixed dishes.

Stakeholder engagements were conducted in combined meetings with different actors such as women, local processors, community health workers, community-based organisations, government representatives, research institutions, and NGOs.

The project culminated in a well-attended final workshop themed '**Together for Child Nutrition**' in Marsabit, Kenya, where stakeholders acknowledged the impact and advocated for broader policy integration. During this event, representatives of involved women gave insights into their achievements and overall, 14 women groups presented the local child foods promoted during the project.



Main Lesson Learned

The NaviNut project revealed the powerful impact that innovations led by women can have on improving child nutrition in a practical and feasible way.

Participatory video proved to be an effective and innovative approach for knowledgeable mothers to document and disseminate practical child feeding and caregiving practices such as enriching and preserving foods, maintaining hygiene, and managing illnesses..



Participatory video training in Saku
© Z. Abulkadir



Consultative Workshop in Saku.
© Z. Abulkadir



Women presenting in food festivals. © Jamal Omar



Participating in these learning activities enabled the women to share their knowledge and experiences with peers and other stakeholders with confidence. Young mothers in particular benefited from learning directly from more experienced women. These peer-led exchanges reassured them about the challenges they faced and strengthened their confidence in implementing shared practices around breastfeeding, complementary feeding, hygiene and children's developmental milestones.

In Marsabit County, the project supported seven women-led initiatives through small grants provided as action funds. These covered food production, processing, packaging and labelling, training sessions, and marketing. Women promoted their products at trade fairs, gaining valuable experience in entrepreneurship and market engagement.

Government and NGO stakeholders acknowledged the vital role of women in food systems and child nutrition. The county departments of trade, culture, and social services expressed their readiness to support community-led projects by creating an enabling environment, while other stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Health and other NGOs, were interested in leveraging the participatory model. Social cohesion also improved, with women reporting increased unity and networks within and across groups. Events such as food fairs provided safe and constructive platforms for inter-group collaboration, which contributed to peace-building efforts in Marsabit during times of heightened ethnic tension.

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POLICY INSIGHTS

Women's agency in child nutrition is a critical but underleveraged resource in African drylands. By recognising and supporting women-led innovations, policies can become more inclusive and effective.

Policymakers should:

- Incorporate **participatory, women-led approaches** into national and local food systems and nutrition strategies. This will enable recognition and enhancement of locally adapted innovations.
- Recognise and enhance the use of **local knowledge** of experienced mothers. For example, by integrating their local assessment methods of the nutritional status of children and by enhancing community platforms for peer learning.
- Preserve traditional/ local food knowledge by **collaborating** with the knowledge holders, the Ministry of Culture, and promote consumption of local and indigenous foods for children's wellbeing.
- Link **livelihood programs with nutrition-related measures**, such as empowering women's groups or improving access to financial resources to promote food systems through sustainable production, processing, and value addition.
- Interventions (such as by NGOs), need to Institutionalise **action research funds**, to effectively contribute to supporting locally anchored food systems.
- Establish **multi-sectoral partnerships** and utilise a multifaceted approach that addresses gendered & socio-economic issues, and enhances women's agency.

The Brief highlights insights and recommendations from the transdisciplinary **NaviNut** research project implemented in Benin and Kenya by nine partners and funded by the Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture (BMEL).

Brief produced by: Patricia J. Kiprono, Hussein T. Wario, and Brigitte A. Kaufmann.

Further information: p.kiprono@ditsl.org or hussein.tadicha@crdd-kenya.org

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