

Theme 2 - Nutrition and consumption: Exploring the potential of local foods to alleviate malnutrition

Conference “Research & Policy: two peas in a pod? A dialogue for food security impact”

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Key statements

- To strengthen local and national food systems and advance nutrition in LMICs in a sustainable way, specific interventions to promote healthy diets need to be designed, which take into account the preferences and needs of local consumers in partner countries.
- The potential nutritional benefits and risks of promoting “local foods” within the diet of people at risk and of the general population need to be further explored and compared to the benefits and risks of other nutrition-specific or nutrition-sensitive interventions.
- In parallel, the potential of these various interventions for local and national value chain development may be explored.
- The effectiveness of nutrition-oriented interventions, their outreach, and their sustainability need to be key factors in the EKN project selection procedures.

Rationale

Malnutrition is still rampant in many parts of the world. The vast majority (88%) of countries studied by the Global Nutrition Report¹ faces a serious burden of two or three of forms of malnutrition, stunting, anemia, and overweight. The African region shows an increase in the number of stunted children since 1990 despite a decrease in the prevalence. In 2016, two of every five of the world’s stunted children and more than half of all wasted children lived in South Asia. “Urgent, integrated response is needed if the world is to meet any of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG),” states the report. SDG2 specifically includes the ambition to improve nutrition, however, 12 of the 17 goals contain indicators that are highly relevant to nutrition². The Dutch government supports nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive solutions to respond to this challenge. There are for example programmes to enhance the fortification of foods (e.g. iodized salt), provide micronutrient supplementation, and test the options for biofortification (e.g. maize with increased levels of vitamin A); while SAM treatment and kitchen gardens are supported too. Enhancing dietary diversity, strengthening the health sector’s role in nutrition as well as in WASH (Water, Sanitation, Hygiene), and fostering the agricultural sector’s role in nutrition, are also part of the policy agenda.

One specific opportunity to improve the quality of diets is to make better use of local and traditional foods. It seems this opportunity is underexploited by international institutions and bilateral donors, even if there have been endeavours in the past by for example the Dutch government to promote these. Local foods have several advantages, such as that they are culturally embedded and are often easily available for rural consumers as they are predominantly grown (or gathered) by local (small-scale) producers.

At the same time, these foods have not always been considered or visible in formal food markets or in national nutrition policies, often because of a lack of information. The nutritional value of local products is often not known, primarily because it concerns a large number of crops and animal food products commonly produced and processed using non-standardized and varying methods, resulting in large variations in nutritional content. Thus, it is not easy to classify and understand local foods, let alone including them in diet optimization models. When optimizing and formalizing local food products into the formal market, the aspect of optimization of nutritional potential should also be taken into account, amongst other factors.

The potential of local/traditional foods to improve diets has been highlighted by several authors, including various NWO-WOTRO/F&BKP Food & Business Research projects. They have argued that to improve nutrient intake, Food Based Recommendations modelling the optimal combination of foods to achieve the maximal nutritional intake utilizing locally available and culturally acceptable foods, are amongst the best and cost-effective options.

¹ <https://www.globalnutritionreport.org/2017/11/03/press-release/>

² <http://scalingupnutrition.org/nutrition/nutrition-and-the-sustainable-development-goals/>

Key lessons, good practices and experiences from ARF and GCP projects

A range of research projects are relevant for this discussion:

- GCP-1 project [Zambian traditional fermented foods](#) found that adding a traditional and locally available fermented milk product to the diet can increase the uptake of several micronutrients as well as the intake of protein to recommended levels.
- GCP-3 project [Scaling-up nutrition-sensitive agricultural initiatives](#) (in South East Asia) constructs a generic framework and guidelines for developing, replicating and scaling-up of effective nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions based on a cross-country, multi-level analysis of the barriers and facilitators in existing cases.
- ARF-1 project [Agroecological food resources for healthy infant nutrition in Benin](#) uses locally produced crops to develop and promote a nutritionally approved, safe and affordable infant food. Three novel food formulas were developed.
- ARF-1 project [Improved varieties of spider plant for Africa \(Benin and Kenya\)](#) investigates the nutritional and market opportunities of spider plant varieties and found that spider plants can contribute to household diets and women livelihoods.
- ARF-1 project [Affordable protein fortifies cereal products developed in Uganda](#) investigates how enhanced cereal based flours with animal protein from cow milk can significantly contribute to the reduction of malnutrition. The project uses local food materials as sources fortificants.
- ARF-3 project [Enhancing Kersting's groundnut production-marketability in Benin](#) focuses on improving seeds and market linkages in Benin for groundnut, taking into account consumer preferences.
- ARF-3 project [Valorisation of Moringa leaves to alleviate malnutrition in vulnerable groups in Benin](#) seeks scientific evidence to enable scaling up the promotion of Moringa Oleifera as a valuable local food resource and income source, to improve maternal and early child nutrition and health.
- ARF-3 project [Commercial Seed System for African Indigenous Vegetables](#) (in Uganda) includes the opportunities to foster women entrepreneurship in indigenous vegetable seeds value chains.

Purpose of the session

Identify the key opportunities for Dutch policy and business to more effectively address nutritional challenges in partner countries and other LMICs. In this context, explore and assess the added value of actions to enhance the use of local foods as part of sustainable and healthy diets, and to strengthen the local and national value chains of those foods. Compare the effectiveness, outreach and sustainability of these actions to those of other nutrition-specific or nutrition-sensitive interventions that the Dutch government is now supporting.

Outcomes of the session

- More awareness among participants of the responsibility of agricultural value chain actors to deliver on nutritious food crops, and of the challenges to foster healthy consumption patterns among consumers.
- Assessment of the potential benefits of “local foods” within the diet of people at risk and the general population in LMICs. How do these compare to the potential benefits and risks of other nutrition-specific or nutrition-sensitive interventions that the Dutch government is now supporting?
- Formulation of a number of recommendations for Dutch or national policy on that basis, taking into account lessons from past experience with support to ‘local foods’. Including specification what Dutch policy should do differently, to respond (better) to the preferences and needs of local consumers in partner countries; to current food system transitions?
- Identification of potential partners and partnerships to facilitate implementation of these recommendations.
- Identification of elements for a further research agenda.