

Promoting local food and nutrition in Ghana

Traditional food fairs are an important tool and space to promote food sovereignty because it takes place in people's own land and within their own socio-cultural setting. At a 2011 food fair organized by the Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development (CIKOD), women farmers exhibited their traditional crops and foods with the aim to emphasize the importance of these crops for national food security. The fair reminded community and political leaders of the value of traditional foods: "We realize that the food and crops we used to eat and that make us healthy are becoming extinct." The leaders indicated their support for the inclusion of traditional foods and agroecological farming into national food security plans.

The Lawra Food Fair

At CIKOD, the Sankofa bird is an institutional symbol. The image of a bird which is looking backward while moving forward refers to the idea of learning from the past to improve the present and the future. One of CIKOD's main objectives is to promote food sovereignty. We use the bird's symbol as a reminder to learn from traditional food production while we work to improve food access and security in our communities.

Currently in Ghana, many government policies are promoting the cultivation of cash crops for export in highly productive zones, rather than food to feed the family, particularly in northern regions most affected by climate change and declining soil fertility. This has led to the paradoxical situation where Ghana is experiencing increasing economic growth generated by agriculture while, at the same time, food insecurity and hunger in rural households in the northern regions are also on the rise.

In an effort to advocate for the production of *food to feed the family*, improve diversity of crops for nutrition and reduce risks caused by climate change,

CIKOD organized a traditional food fair in June 2011 in the district of Lawra. Over three hundred women farmers and hundreds of men and children from the Lawra and Nandom areas in the Upper West Region participated in an exhibition of indigenous foods and seeds. The women farmers were led by their traditional women leaders.

The exhibition was preceded by presentations by the Regional Minister, the District Chief Executive and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. Other presenters were the rural women, the Paramount Chief and LACERD, a local partner of CIKOD.

The regional Minister and Paramount Chief took turns recalling memories of traditional foods that are now becoming extinct. The coordinator of the Rural Women Farmer Association (RU-WFAG), Madam Rebecca Sebri, went at lengths to describe the negative impacts of genetically modified seed, pesticides and chemical fertilizers on the health of rural families. This was corroborated by the representative of the Ministry of Health, Madam Doris Ziekah.



Women from various villages in the two traditional areas took turns performing songs describing the lack of sufficient healthy food and the negative effects of industrial farming methods. These spontaneous songs were accompanied by dancing and conveyed strong messages on the value of traditional foods. The songs also advocated against the use of genetically modified seeds, pesticides and inorganic fertilizers and the negative impacts they have on family health.

Author Linus Kabobah presented a new CIKOD publication entitled, “*Indigenous Agriculture and food security in the Lawra District*”. This was followed by tasting over fifty samples of traditional foods by the dignitaries and the general public, including *tuo*, *beng saab*, *tubani*, *perkpage*, *gbulyang*, *bir-neme*, *ny-usaab*, *piereh*, and many other dishes.

Results and impacts

As a result of the fair, traditional foods, especially *tubani*, that were once looked down upon by the youth in particular, have now become popular. The Director of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture extended an invitation to the women of RUWFAG to exhibit at the upcoming 2011 District Farmers’ Day celebration. They accepted the invitation, and were awarded a prize for their contribution to food security in the district. The Director later invited the leaders of the RUWFAG to his office where they discussed how the ministry could accommodate the ideas of the women into the district planning.

Youth in Tanchara took cue from the success of the traditional food fair by organizing a quiz on traditional crops and foods as a way of educating themselves.



Patricia Dianon, chair of RUWFAG

How traditional crops build food security

Maize is one of the crops currently promoted in Ghana. While it is more productive per hectare than traditional crops such as sorghum, millet or yams, high maize yields require large amounts of fertilizer and regular rainfall. This makes it a higher risk crop for farmers in the dry lands of northern Ghana because fertilizer is expensive. Irregular and reduced rainfall make harvests unreliable.

Increasing productivity to strengthen food security must happen in a sustainable way: crops should be resilient to climate change, enhance nutrition, and not require expensive, outside inputs. Traditional seeds and crops, once dietary staples in North Ghana, have all these characteristics. Cultivating them reduces economic risk, increases soil health, saves scarce water, maintains biodiversity, builds self-reliance, and improves nutrition.

Re-integrating traditional foods in the diets of rural people is crucial for promoting food security and sovereignty in North Ghana, especially when combined with other agroecological practices such as crop rotation, inter-cropping and agroforestry.

The fair also motivated women farmers in the Lawra and Nandom areas to invest in increasing the production of traditional crops on their fields. For example, they instituted a mutual savings and loans support programme to provide access to credit, although limited, to buy seeds and labour to increase production of traditional crops. The subsequent season saw a doubling of production of traditional crops such as *kpur-womeh*, *piereh*, *songsogli*, etc.

Factors of success

The success of the Food Fair can be attributed to various factors. One, we followed appropriate protocol to engage the political and traditional leaders. Second, we widely publicized the event.

In Ghana, traditional protocol requires that the first point of call is the chief's palace to offer a token gift as recognition of his role. This was the first thing the CIKOD team did when extending invitations for the food fair. Before this, CIKOD sent an advance team to give prior notice to the chief and *pognaa* as well

as the District Chief Executive (appointed by the President) on the plans for the event weeks before the event. The long standing relationship and trust built by CIKOD with traditional authorities was one of the reasons that convinced them to participate in the program. It also took place within the socio-cultural setting which made people feel comfortable.

Their participation was important, because the public tasting public tasting of traditional foods by the political and traditional leaders - especially chiefs - convinced the general public of the value of traditional foods. As the saying goes, "What the eyes see, the heart desires". Tasting the food convinced people of the importance of traditional crops, and brought back many memories. The *pognaa* of Lawra, Pognaa Karbo I lamented that, "*When I was a young girl, bengvaar and groundnut soup with kazing-saab was what was prepared to feed the young men that came to help on my father's farm. This traditional diet gave them strength and vitality for the hard work on the farm. This has now been replaced by rice.*"



Women perform self-composed songs about healthy food at the Lawra food fair.



Proudly displaying nutritious traditional dishes at the food fair.

The program received wide publicity through radio, television and print media. This was a result of our good relationships with journalists. These publications all had positive captions encouraging government and people to patronize traditional crops and food.

There were a few minor difficulties. The program, was impeded by a late start due to late arrival of the dignitaries. This made the program rather tight. Some women could not also participate because of challenges with transport.

Conclusions and recommendations

The food fair proved to be an effective strategy for advocating wider production and consumption of traditional crops and for the inclusion of traditional foods in the national food security program. This is because traditional fairs are open spaces that allow participation from all categories of people. CIKOD

made use of local knowledge and resources which enhanced ownership for the fair. Soon after the fair, similar fairs were organized in Ko and Tanchara by the traditional women leaders on their own. In most West African communities there are thanksgiving festivals after harvests. These local festivals are wonderful opportunities for organizing traditional food fairs that educate people of the value of traditional food crops as a means of increasing food security.

In May 2013, organizations from across West Africa convened in Ghana for a workshop on amplifying agroecological solutions. This story was written during the workshop by staff of CIKOD, the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development in Ghana.
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