

Indigenous foods for food sovereignty of women in Northern Ghana

The inability of families to provide three meals a day is a huge cry that we hear coming from the Lawra District in Northern Ghana. For years, the government provided free chemicals and fertilizers to farmers as part of the Green Revolution in Africa. Now, due to years of serious land degradation, the farm lands are in a terrible state and do not produce enough food to feed families.

The idea of going back to our roots surfaced at a conference that united women from West-African countries, in which Northern Ghana was represented. We were inspired by leaders from Mali who told us about how they increased awareness among rural women. Back home, we met with traditional women leaders, market women, women's groups, and family farmers. We exchanged information and experiences about the effects of pesticides on our vegetables and food crops.

In the Lawra district, a family died in Wulli after they ate bambara beans that had been treated with pesticides. We also spoke with a woman who decided to chew on raw vegetable at the market as a way of testing whether pesticides had been used on the vegetables. Tasting and smelling, she realised that pesticides were used. After complaining to the vegetable seller, another woman standing by said that she had experienced the same. After serving her family with a soup of 'pesticide vegetables,' she shared that they had upset stomachs and had to be treated at the hospital.

Women are the solution

Therefore, we started to sensitize women about the effects of pesticides on vegetables and food crops. With the support of CIKOD, an NGO in Ghana, we launched an initiative against the use of pesticides. It was called the 'We are the Solution' campaign. Yes, Women are the Solution, because we can carry important messages to others. In that spirit, we shared stories with our families and friends about the negative effects of pesticide use.



We advised women not to purchase the greenest and shiniest vegetables (an indication of pesticide use). There was also awareness creation in the use and importance of organic manure.

As a culmination of the campaign, we organised a food fair, displaying our local traditional foods on which no pesticides are used. At this so called Durbar, traditional leaders such as the Paramount Chief of Lawra traditional area, the paramount Pognamine (queens), and dignitaries from both districts and regions were present to grace the occasion. They expressed their support of RUWFAG's ideas. Our women groups composed and sang songs about the harmful effect of the use of chemicals on food crops and vegetables.

Our activities contributed to the spreading of non-chemical practices. In the villages of Kunyukuo and Tongo for example, women are no longer spraying pesticides. They collect animal droppings and use them as insecticides on the crops, as well as for organic manure. There is also a visible increase in the availability of traditional food and crops at the markets, such as that of dawa-dawa, a local condiment

that was abandoned for industrial Maggi cubes. As an unexpected result of our 'health talks', membership of RUWFAG women groups increased from 10 to 35 women groups from 2011 to 2013. RUWFAG reached out to these various women groups with the messages.

Factors of success... and our difficulties

What helped convince the women was that we approached the pesticide issue from the angle of health. Since they are the main caretakers of their families, this issue resonated well. One day, we met the chief's wife in the market. She was eager to listen to us and she wholeheartedly supported our messages. Her support and backing gave our campaign much more weight.

The women appreciated that we visited them in their homes, instead of calling them for a central meeting. Generally, rural women have little spare time. They are always very busy with farming, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their families. Our visits made it easy for them to hear what we had to say. And we did not just visit these women once. In

fact, we built intense relationships with the women and travelled often to their houses. This was one of the reasons that we were so successful.

Market places are very important informal meeting spaces for women. It is here that all the vegetables from commercial gardeners are for sale. This makes it the most important place for a face-to-face education of both sellers and buyers of vegetables in the community. The market is a more effective place to educate women because this approach does not take extra time. They are able to continue with their normal market activities while listening to educators.

What worked against us were the activities from the Ministry of Agriculture, who promotes and supplies foreign chemical insecticides to farmers. It is hard for farmers to resist this. Another difficulty was the wide and cheap availability of imported food additives and the perception of women that these imported additives are easier and better to use. Lastly, there was only limited funding for travel expenses for RUWFAG to travel out to women groups.



Pognaa Patricia Dianon sensitizes fellow women about the effects of pesticides on their food.



Explaining the virtues of FMNR to visiting farmers

Based on this initial work about pesticide use on vegetables and improving family health, we are building on our experience to spread other agroecological farming practices. One important strategy we recently learned about, is farmer managed natural regeneration of trees (FMNR). This practice is about allowing selected trees to regenerate on the farm. This is easy to do and improves soil fertility, generates fodder for livestock and provides firewood for households. Women's time in gathering fodder and firewood are reduced, and our farms become more productive. We learned about these activities through a recent cross visit and are now working to implement them in our own communities. We see all these activities as steps towards building food sovereignty for rural women in northern Ghana





Women celebrating FMNR in Talensi

The way forward

RUWFAG is looking forward to continuing to share best practices with neighbouring countries for the improvement of agroecology. We will keep encouraging the production, preservation and use of indigenous seeds and foods for food sovereignty among rural women, and promote the consumption of healthy vegetables.

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 members of RUWFAG, the Rural Women Farmers Association of Ghana.



By the Rural Women Farmers Association Ghana:
Mary Assumpta Mwinsigten, Pognaa Patricia Dianon,
Rebecca A Sabri.

September 2013