



**Global
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Nutrition education as a strategy to strengthen family farming households and improve people's diets

Summary of discussion no. 105

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Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition

About the Document

This document summarizes the results of the online discussion "Nutrition education as a strategy to strengthen family farming households and improve people's diets" held on the Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (www.fao.org/fsnforum) from 3 to 31 July 2014.

The following summary aims at providing readers with a general overview of the discussion, including the list of all references shared. For the full text of all contributions and further background information please refer to the discussion page:

www.fao.org/fsnforum/forum/discussions/nutrition-education

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Introduction

In many poor countries, beliefs and unhealthy practices, coupled with the lack of nutritious and varied food, contribute to widespread malnutrition, which in turn aggravates existing poverty. At the same time, many population groups (both urban and rural) are exposed to the intensive promotion of low-cost, low-nutritional-value products. Malnutrition is also a public health concern in more affluent societies due, in part, to overconsumption of highly processed foods and loss of traditional foods and food culture.

The participants in this online discussion widely shared the view that nutrition education has great potential to improve the food choices, dietary quality and diversity of farming families and the general public. General points are summarized here, illustrated with examples of programmes and initiatives (in boxes).

Supply and demand

To raise consumption of nutritious foods and reduce dependence on highly processed food products, many felt that the first priority was to raise public awareness of healthy diets and the benefits of specific foods, build motivations, develop food-related skills and design educational strategies to allow people to improve their food habits, make informed choices and thus exert consumer demand - which in its turn drives production.

Others suggested that the first target should be the farmers, the foundation of the food system: nutrition education, coupled with incentive policies, should encourage increased production of nutritious foods and diversified crops and make the option commercially attractive.

The challenge is to find a coherent way both to empower consumers to prefer nutritious produce, and to encourage farmers to diversify production for the market, while also feeding themselves and their families optimally. In this way the two chains become mutually reinforcing.

Some participants went further, arguing that nutrition education needs to target all members and levels of society if lasting changes in food and nutrition security are to be achieved. In this view, family farmers are considered as key players, in view of their dual role as producers and potential agents of change.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1

What are the existing national and regional programs which aim to improve the dietary quality and dietary diversity of farming families?

Experiences and observations of forum participants revealed that even when farming families have physical access to nutritious food, they still struggle with poor diets and unhealthy food practices.

Farmers therefore need nutrition education, preferably integrated into existing agricultural programs, to make sure that they consume their nutritious produce as well as selling it and to explore other avenues to dietary diversity. The main strategies shared were:

1. Using storage and distribution centers where smallholders collect their produce as settings for nutrition education activities.
2. Incorporating nutrition education components into already successful farmer field schools.
3. Training extension workers and agriculture technicians, who have frequent access to farmers, in nutrition education and healthy diets, so they can work in tandem with qualified nutritionists.
4. Integrating nutrition education into programs for food safety and good agriculture practices.
5. Promoting homestead, school and community gardens, supported by nutrition education, to give rural and urban families (including farmers) access to a wider variety of nutritious produce.
6. Nutrition education actions developed in collaboration with rural youth that aim at healthy eating and diversity, adding value to family farming activities.

Also important for success in programs for improving nutrition knowledge and practices were:

- Close collaboration with leaders and communal associations, especially in rural areas (identified as a best practice in agricultural programs).
- Tackling gender issues such as reducing the work load of rural women, developing maternal and infant and young child feeding programmes and improving agricultural technologies.
- Placing a focus on sustainability.

Some of the main constraints identified in this matter were:

- Trained nutrition professionals are not interested in working in agriculture.
- Few extension workers are trained in nutrition, healthy diets and maternal and child nutrition.
- Difficulty of reaching the most vulnerable families.
- There is not enough documented evidence of the nutritional impact of these programmes.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2

How can nutrition education increase the demand for local family farming produce with high nutritional value, and thus contribute to improving dietary diversity and to protecting traditional foods and the local food culture?

Many claimed that nutrition education can empower consumers to opt for nutritious, locally available food over low nutritional quality, highly processed products, thus generating increased demand for nutritious produce and eventually motivating farmers and smallholders.

Some of the main strategies shared were:

- Programmes that promote healthy eating habits and skills in mothers and children, which center on traditional, culturally-acceptable local foods.
- School programs that combine education in healthy eating with parent involvement and school meals made with produce purchased directly from family farms.
- National food based dietary guidelines and recommendations for the general public, which valorize sustainable food production systems and family farming production.
- Development of materials that promote traditional, nutritious foods and ways of incorporating them into daily meal preparation.

On this topic, it was also mentioned that the promotion of locally-produced, nutritious foods and specific produce can be done effectively through farmers' markets, and in richer countries, country fairs or festivals. It was suggested that food chains need to be shortened through establishing and strengthening a direct relationship between farmers and consumers, so that both can gain an understanding of each other's needs, commercial and nutritional.

In the cases where a demand for local nutritious foods is already present, but high prices and low availability hampers the access, participants of the forum suggested that farmers need increased support in becoming more competitive with higher yields and lower production costs. Investment in infrastructure is also often needed in order to bring down prices.

Some of the constraints identified:

Nutrition education is seldom backed by high level policies, hence official interest and budgets are low (also sometimes affected by political interests). National food policies often promote domestic production of food without including an educational component aimed at farmers or consumers and there are only a few educational programs aiming at protecting traditional foods and local food cultures. Even social protection programs that target families, women and youth often do not include nutrition education, while many nutrition programs themselves have no education strategy.

Forum contributors also saw a widespread lack of communication and collaboration between the education, health and agriculture sectors which severely hampers effective nutrition education. They called for nutrition interventions to go beyond the health sector, especially to include agriculture, and for better coordination of the sectors at the local and regional level.

Other limitations on nutrition education programming included lack of qualified nutrition educators and lack of parental involvement in educational sessions for children.

Examples of specific projects and activities shared by the participants



The *Patronato de Nutrición* in Panama

The vision of the *Patronato de Nutrición* in Panama is to empower farmers (through farming programmes) to ensure income through commercializing produce and to improve food security by giving access to nutritious food for all families.

The Patronato implements self-sustainable farms in the 33 poorest districts of the country, supporting the production and marketing of rice, maize, beans, cassava, plantain, yam, vegetables and livestock. It manages 306 projects benefitting over 7500 Panamanians in both rural indigenous and non-indigenous areas. In addition it aims to educate on intra-household food distribution based on the individual needs of each member of the family, and to ensure that the food consumed is varied, safe and of good quality.



Farmer field schools as a channel for nutrition education

The farmer field school (FFS) learning process is being used to target resource-poor households with pregnant and lactating women and children under the age of two, for increasing access to diversified nutrient rich vegetables, fish and poultry. Farmers learn to rear poultry as an important nutritional addition to the household diet and its potential for generating income for women. SPRING field facilitators ensure appropriate vegetable, poultry and fish production practices are adopted and link agricultural topics to household food consumption, intra-household food distribution and household dietary diversity, particularly for women and children. FFS participants are supported to breed poultry and fish and to grow up to five nutritious vegetables and fruits per planting season. FFS incorporate key messages on essential nutrition and hygiene actions into all vegetable, fish and poultry production activities. FFS are designed to respond to the needs of farmers and towards encouraging creativity and independence.



Andean Alliance for Sustainable Development in Peru

The approach of the Andean Alliance for Sustainable Development is based on school and family greenhouses, educational workshops in the school curriculum, using produce from greenhouses in school meals and selling surplus to the community. This approach has several advantages:

- The produce is used in school lunches, directly benefitting the most vulnerable.
- The focus on nutritious produce (through greenhouses and workshops) positively influences children's outlook and behaviour at an early age.
- Students become advocates for change in their families and communities (including farming families).

This project also works closely with the communities and local government to address communities' specific needs.



A virtual nutrition network for Brazil

In order to strengthen nutrition education programs a virtual network called *Ideias na Mesa* was launched by the Brazilian Government to exchange experiences and lessons learned and to establish technical and methodological collaboration among all involved in nutrition education. This is done through online discussions, online courses and through the publication of two thematic online magazines, among other activities.



Awareness raising in Brazil

The "*Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate a Fome*", in Brazil is running an awareness raising campaign called "Organic and Sustainable Brazil". The campaign aims to draw the attention of consumers and wholesalers to products of family farms and the benefits of organic products for people's lives and the environment.

The FIFA World Cup 2014 campaign purchased several family farm products for distribution to the volunteers who worked at the event. Produce from family farming and organic production was also marketed in stalls in ten of the twelve cities hosting World Cup events.



Support of production and home consumption for better nutrition in Chile

This programme run by the Ministry of Social Development of Chile aims to increase the availability of nutritious foods through education and growing foods for family consumption in poor and vulnerable households.

The programme uses community workshops as an educational strategy of collective learning, where practical activities and the experiences of the participants are emphasized. At the same time, individual sessions with selected families are also carried out. Here, a diagnosis of the nutritional and production needs is done in conjunction with the families, and a series of activities and compromises derive from this process.



Multistakeholder nutrition education in the Andean Region

Innovación para la seguridad y la soberanía alimentaria en la region andina (ISS Andes) is a project implemented jointly with the International Potato Center in four Andean countries (Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia), which combines nutrition education, capacity development, improvements in production systems and promotion of food and nutrition security. The educational component, which is carried out by the NGO's CARE and PRISMA, consists of training an integrated group of mothers, community and health workers, and focuses on preventing child malnutrition and promoting a diversified diet, emphasizing the nutritional potential of traditional potato varieties. In order to increase ownership, the community aspect of the training is emphasized.



Food for garbage in Bangkok

A community garden in Bangkok has been setup by the Independent Science & Partnership Council (ISPC), CGIAR and AVRDC, the World Vegetable Center, in which eighty poor families have come together and rented approximately half an acre of land from the government. Here they grow a variety of vegetables and trees and keep chicken, ducks, fish and pigs. Members get goods from the farm by contributing collected garbage, organic kitchen waste, papers, plastics etc. The organic waste is used to feed the livestock and fish, prepare compost and liquid fertilizer. The inorganic waste is sorted and sold to recycling companies. The money is used to buy goods for a grocery shop also present in the community.