



## Indigenous methods of food preparation: what is their impact on food security and nutrition?

Discussion No. 89 from 09 to 30 May 2013

Dear FSN Forum members,

I am very happy to be the facilitator of this online discussion on indigenous methods of food preparation. I must highlight that this forum held an interesting previous discussion on how indigenous knowledge systems can be used to improve agricultural productivity and food security among rural poor communities. However, we did not touch on how communities use this knowledge that is passed from generation to generation to prepare their food and the possible implications on the socio-economic dynamics of a typical rural household.

Let me start by introducing myself. My name is Edward Mutandwa and I am a graduate research assistant at Mississippi State University's College of Forestry in the US. I have previously worked in Rwanda at the Higher Institute of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry (French acronym ISAE), a public institution focusing on improvement of rural livelihoods. During that time I had the opportunity to work with rural communities and this current topic emanates from those experiences. I have also personally seen how some methods like using grass, soil and ash can be useful in preserving sweet potatoes (article in African Studies Quarterly, Vol. 9, No 3, 2007 <http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v9/v9i3a4.htm> ). Before going any further, it is important to define indigenous knowledge. It is the knowledge that is unique to a given culture and provides a basis for local-level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural-resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities (Warren 1991, Flavier et al 1995, , Kolawole, 2001, Maikhuri, et al, 1999). Unfortunately, this knowledge is usually not taken seriously as a viable alternative for ensuring food security and nutrition. Many people rely on methods based on the scientific approach and thus IKS may be at the verge of extinction.

Rwanda is a small country in East Africa which has experienced tremendous strides in the areas of agricultural and food security. At the same time, culture and tradition still remain vivid aspects of their day to day lives. There are some very popular foods like "*isombe*" which is prepared from cassava leaves. However, one thing that is striking about this delicacy is the seemingly high opportunity cost of time that women spend preparing it. It can actually be prepared for 5 or more hours (grinding) and then an extra 2 to 3 hours of cooking. There are other food classes in the same category. This has several implications on household socio-economic setup. First, since food preparation is done by women, the amount of labour time available for other activities in the household is limited. Since the household operates under constrained optimization conditions, what can be done to ensure efficient use of limited labour resources? Secondly, after spending so

much time from grinding leaves to cooking, it is not clear whether the nutritional content is maintained or reduced. Third, it would be interesting to see if there are any formalized studies carried out to determine the nutritional contents of foods prepared in an indigenous way.

Let me state the questions of interest more formally:

More broadly **can we consider indigenous methods of food preparation as a viable means for achieving food security and nutrition in rural poor communities?** I am specifically interested in hearing from the diverse base of FSN Forum members on the following issues:

1. **Are there any lively examples of indigenous methods of food preparation and how do they influence food security and nutrition? Formal published research will be welcome on this point**
2. **What informal strategies have been put in place by local communities to ensure that this knowledge is not lost?**
3. **What is the perception of formal public institutes in your country towards integrating IKS in food preparation programs? Are there any opportunities for modifying some methods for example for child nutrition based programs?**
4. **If indeed indigenous methods are important, what can governments do to create incentives for their continued use?**

I would like to thank you in advance for taking your time to participate in this discussion.

Edward