Empowering Kenyan Women with Nutrition Education

The Smart Food initiative is working to empower rural Kenyan women, families, and communities through participatory cooking classes, nutrition training, and door-to-door educational outreach. According to Feed the Future, about 21 percent of Kenyan children under the age of five are experiencing stunted growth, which is evidence of chronic malnutrition. The Kenyan Ministry for Public Health and Sanitation reports that “poor infant and young child feeding practices, poor maternal nutrition, low access to adequate and diversified diets, childhood illnesses and inadequate access to health and nutrition services” partially caused this high percentage of malnutrition.

To address these issues, the International Crop Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the Smart Food initiative are working with rural Kenyan communities to promote millets, sorghum, and legumes, or Smart Foods. According to ICRISAT, “the benefits of healthy eating, as highlighted during the training, are improvement of children’s performance in schools, reduced chances of family members becoming ill, and improved productivity, because healthy people have more energy to work harder and make more positive decisions, and in turn, make more money.” Through these interactive training programs, ICRISAT intends to repopularize, increase demand for, and encourage the development of Smart Food crops. Their hope is that this will benefit small-scale farmers by increasing their incomes and the wellbeing of their families.

Millets, sorghum, and legumes tend to be nutritious, drought-tolerant, and farmer-friendly crops. However, over the last 50 years, Smart Foods have disappeared from many Kenyan farms and diets. This is attributed to a growing lack of investment, popularity, familiarity, and knowledge of Smart Foods. In many cases, rural farmers and families are now relying more on popular, yet less nutritious and less reliable, grains like rice, wheat, and maize, sometimes provided by the government and relief organizations.

With funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), ICRISAT is partnering with Feed the Future’s Kenya Accelerated Value Chain Development Program (AVCD) project, Egerton University, Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), and county departments of health and agriculture to engage in community outreach and counteract to promote traditional crops.

After visiting over 100,000 homes to recommend healthy, micronutrient dense diets, ICRISAT held healthy eating workshops for more than 10,000 women, as well as participatory cooking classes for over 12,000 women farmers. According to Christine Wangari, the Smart Food Coordinator for East and Southern Africa, the interactive cooking trainings teach women how to cook various healthy and tasty dishes, including: sorghum cake, pearl millet chapati (bread), pigeonpea chapati, sorghum-cowpea pilau (pilaf), sorghum-green gram stew, and a traditional pearl millet drink known as Kinaa or Mburugi. These training sessions also cover hygienic cooking practices and energy-saving cooking methods. Read more