

# FOOD FAIRS REVIVE LOCAL FOOD AND NUTRITION

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Food fairs are an important tool and space to promote food sovereignty as they take place in local public spaces and within people's own socio-cultural settings. One excellent example was a food fair in Ghana, organised by the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development (CIKOD). Women farmers exhibited traditional crops and foods, emphasising their importance for local and national food and nutrition security. The fair reminded community and political leaders of the value of neglected traditional foods. Some years later, it can be seen how this and subsequent food fairs helped to ensure the improved integration of traditional foods and agroecological farming into national food security plans.

In Ghana as in many other countries, government policies tend to give far greater support to the production of cash crops for export, than to local food crops that play a vital role for good nutrition and food security. This is especially marked in the more arid northern regions of Ghana that are most affected by climate change and declining soil fertility. This has led to the paradoxical situation where the country is experiencing increasing economic growth generated by agriculture, based on export crops such as cocoa, pineapples and bananas, while at the same time food and nutrition insecurity in rural households in the drier regions of the north are also on the rise.



Photo: Groundswell International

To advocate for the production of more 'food to feed the family,' to diversify crops to include local foods for nutrition, and to reduce risks caused by climate change, **CIKOD organised a traditional food fair in June 2011 in the district of Lawra in Upper West Region**. More than three hundred women farmers, led by their traditional female leaders and hundreds of men and children from the Lawra and Nandom areas, participated in an exhibition of indigenous foods and seeds.

## Traditional food and crops

To improve access to local foods and diversify family diets for better nutrition in rural communities, it is essential to learn from traditional food production practices. **There are very many more traditional or indigenous crops as compared to the handful of staple crops that have become widely promoted in the name of the Green Revolution where the focus is only on short term productivity gains**. Furthermore, a diet consisting of traditional crops provides a far richer level of nutrition than these now dominant staple crop plants.

**In northern Ghana, traditional cereals, legumes, roots and tubers, such as sorghum, millet, groundnut, songsoli and yams, grown with local knowledge passed from generation to generation, provide families with a balanced nutrition**. Another advantage is that such crops often produce at least some yield even in dry years. Thus, traditional crops contribute to nutrition not

only through diversified diets, but also by reducing the risks associated with uncertain rainfall, and ensure food security even in drought years. They are adapted to local conditions and so require fewer, if any, of the costly external inputs that are needed to grow rice, maize or specialised export crops.

**Women from the Rural Women Farmers Association of Ghana (RUWFAG) carried out a successful awareness raising campaign at market places throughout the district about the adverse health effects of eating vegetables that had been sprayed with toxic pesticides.** Based on their traditional knowledge, and armed with data about local cases of sickness and even death caused by the use of toxic chemicals in agriculture, RUWFAG had all the ingredients necessary for an effective information campaign at their food fair, in order to promote traditional, climate resilient and diverse foods that increase nutrition and build food sovereignty.



### All walks of life

The food fair was a special occasion where **local farmers, traditional leaders and political leaders came together** in the same place to chew over the same issues. But each group used their own way to express themselves in relation to local foods.

The regional minister and the Paramount Chief both recalled memories of the way they used to eat traditional foods and the meaning these foods used to have. However, both noted that such local foods have become rarer over the years. **The coordinator of RUWFAG, Madam Rebecca Sebri,** described in detail the negative impacts of genetically modified crops, pesticides and chemical fertilizers on the health of rural families. This was corroborated by **the representative of the Ministry of Health, Madam Doris Ziekah.**

Performing arts by local people played a major role in the fair. Women from different villages took turns to perform songs that described the lack of adequate amounts of healthy food, and the negative effects of industrial farming methods. These songs, some of which were spontaneous, also conveyed strong messages on the value of traditional foods. All such songs were accompanied by dancing.

This was followed by **an official tasting session of more than 50 traditional foods by the dignitaries and the general public.** The local foods tasted included **tuo, beng saab, tubani, perkpage, gbulyang, bir-neme, nyusaab, piereh,** and many other dishes. It was especially significant that traditional leaders ate these foods in front of other people. Although this went against community customs, the traditional leaders decided to do this to show the importance they gave to the message of promoting nutritious local foods.

## A new surge in popularity

As a result of the fair, traditional foods, once looked down upon particularly by the youth, have now become much more popular. Importantly, this heightened cultivation and consumption of local crops has been matched with the increased recognition of traditional foods and the role of women at the political level.

The Director of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture extended an invitation to the women of RUWFAG to provide an exhibit of local foods at the upcoming District Farmers' Day celebration. They accepted, and were subsequently awarded a prize for their contribution to food security in the district. The Director later invited the leaders of RUWFAG to his office, where they discussed how the ministry could accommodate their ideas into district planning and priorities.

Youth in Tanchara took a cue from the success of the traditional food fair and organised a quiz on traditional crops and foods. This was a novel means of educating themselves and their friends. **Soon afterwards, traditional women leaders decided to organise similar fairs in Ko and Tanchara districts.**

The food fair also motivated women farmers in the **Lawra** and **Nandom areas** to invest in increasing the production of traditional crops on their fields. They started a mutual savings and loan support programme to provide access to credit to women members to buy seeds, and for engaging labour to increase the areas grown with traditional crops. The subsequent season saw a doubling in the production of such crops, including **kpur-womeh**, **piereh** and **songsogli**.

A little while after the fair, an organisation of midwives approached CIKOD with a request for developing **a recipe book of traditional dishes using local crops**. This recipe book proved a great success. It continues to be distributed to all the pregnant women they support.

## Factors of success

**The active engagement of political and traditional leaders was one of the keys to the impacts of the food fair.** The CIKOD team followed the appropriate protocols in inviting the chief pognaa (the women's traditional leader) and the District Chief Executive. They did this well in advance, so building trust and the basis for a longstanding relationship with the traditional authorities.

Their participation was essential, because the public tasting of traditional foods by the political and traditional leaders, especially the chiefs, helped to convince 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** lamented that, "When I was a young girl, **bengvaar** and **groundnut soup** with **kaziong-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. **This has now been replaced by rice.**"

The socio-cultural setting of the fair was also important. The local tradition of having a fair, being familiar to the many farmers who attended, made people feel comfortable. The fair was based on local knowledge and local resources which added to a sense of ownership by the men and women farmers who attended. **Morale at the fair was boosted by the wide publicity provided through radio, television and print media.** This was possible because of CIKOD's good relationships with journalists. Various publications all had positive captions encouraging everyone to patronise traditional crops and food.

### **The bigger picture**

**This fair and the promotion of traditional crops and foods directly confront the dominant food system based on Green Revolution technologies and thinking, which has permeated most of Ghana.** Food fairs are part of a broader range of activities that promote agroecological farming, and together are important in challenging this increasingly entrenched farming system.

This experience has shown how food fairs, if organised to create a common space for farmers, traditional and political leaders, can have huge potential for further strengthening the role of traditional foods and crops, while also strengthening agroecological practices. In many West African communities there are thanksgiving festivals after harvests. These local festivals are also wonderful opportunities for holding traditional food fairs that demonstrate the value of traditional food crops as a means of increasing food sovereignty and nutrition security.

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