

## Stories from the field: Improving nutrition and livelihoods through Farmer Field and Life Schools

*Based on interviews with FFLS members in Uganda and Rwanda*

*Malnutrition is a threat to the wellbeing of vulnerable populations in Eastern Africa. Poor rural households often do not have access to high quality and nutritious foods or they lack a good understanding of improved nutrition habits. Through the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women and men in the region are now being trained on the nutritious value of locally available foods through the Farmer Field and Life Schools (FFLS).*

"First you wash the pumpkin and cut it into small pieces. Then you chop tomatoes and potatoes. You fry all these ingredients in a pan with oil." Sabina Akwero explains some of the lessons she learned during a 4-day nutrition training. Sabina is a member of the Farmer Field and Life Schools in Ngora, northern Uganda. The FFLS methodology is a community based participatory learning process. Working together in small groups, farmers learn and adapt improved agricultural production techniques under the guidance of a trained facilitator. Nutrition is an important part of the FFLS programme. The farmers learn about the nutritious value of different local foods and they are taught on the importance of hygiene during preparation.

"I was first trained on nutrition at the local health facility but the follow-up was poor," continues Sabina, who is a widow with seven children. "At the FFLS, we learned how to prepare land, plant crops and we were trained on food preparation. I now know that a healthy diet is a combination of a variety of foods like vegetables, roots crops, cereals and fruit."

**'They had never tasted carrots so I explained how to plant and cook them at home.'**

*Marie-Rose Ingadire*

FFLS members are recommended to start their own backyard kitchen garden where they can further experiment. Louise Uweyazu, who lives in Gatsibo, Rwanda, involved her whole family in the project. Her three children each have a small plot where they grow crops. Her husband is in charge of watering the garden, while Louise ploughs and plants over nine different

types of vegetables. Impressed with the knowledge she gained from attending her local FFLS, Louise decided to set up her own group. She now facilitates 27 farmers, mostly women, on a weekly basis. "I teach them how to grow vegetables and explain why they should be eating different types of food. I also invite my participants to my garden for observation or I pay a visit to their homes so I can give them extra advice on the crops in their garden."



*Louise with her family in their kitchen garden*

While the FFSL mainly focuses on agricultural skill development, the facilitators also spend time discussing life lessons. For Louise the gender-based violence discussions were helpful: "I learned how to manage conflict. We now solve our problems through communication."

### Improved nutrition, better health

One of the biggest advantages of the nutrition training has been the shift to a more diversified diet as the participants learned about different crops and their varieties. Marie Rose Ingadire, who was trained as a facilitator after her active participation in her FFLS in Rwanda, introduced her members to carrots: "They had never tasted carrots so I explained how to plant and cook them at home. Afterwards, many farmers decided to grow carrots in their backyard kitchen garden."

The families have noticed a significant change. Célestine Murenzi<sup>1</sup> planted 15 varieties of vegetables and fruits on her plot of a quarter of an acre after she received seeds at

<sup>1</sup> The name was changed to protect her identity

her FFLS. Now Célestine and her family drink a glass of healthy beetroot and pineapple juice every morning. Célestine is HIV positive. “I used to be admitted to hospital twice a year but since I started growing and eating different types of vegetables I feel much stronger. When you look at me, you cannot see I am HIV positive unless I tell you.”

Although most of the vegetables are grown for her family’s own consumption, Célestine has now started to sell the surplus on the market. “I used my plot to experiment and the results were positive. I earned RWF 5,000 (USD 7.5) after the first and RWF 25,000 (USD 37) after the second



*Sabina in her eggplant plot with her hut in the background*

harvest. With the money I constructed a kitchen.” According to the sector representative, Célestine has also shared her knowledge with her community: “Célestine has impacted the community greatly by assisting other village

members growing their own vegetables.”

Although the lives of its members have improved, lessons can still be learned to further strengthen the FFLS programme. Sabina attended a cooking demonstration on soya beans but she was unable to put the new knowledge into practice. “The soya bean cakes and mandazis were very tasty but soya beans are expensive and not available here so I couldn’t prepare these at home.” Louise also pointed out the need for extra practical cooking sessions: “As we were not trained on how to prepare all the different foods, we cook them the way we have always done.”

Nevertheless, the Farmer Field and Life Schools have become an important approach to train women and men in Eastern Africa on improved food and nutrition practices, but Sabina concludes that more education is needed: “Younger women need to learn more about nutrition and how to prepare different foods to help raise their families. Extra food security and nutrition training is definitely required.”

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