

SMALL GARDENS ENRICHING MEALS IN BUNYANGABU

What children eat in their earliest years shapes survival, learning and future productivity. Yet for many families, nutrition is constrained by habits, misinformation and limited choices. As Uganda confronts persistent malnutrition, there is growing recognition that change requires informed communities and stronger policies. *New Vision*, in partnership with UNICEF and the Ministry of Health, is spotlighting the challenges and solutions shaping children's diets and their chances of a healthy start.

By Jonan Tusingwire

Hope Tigabasa, a resident of Kajumiro A Village in Kajumiro Parish, Katinga Town Council, Bunyangabu district, is 80 years old. Yet despite her age, she remains actively involved in farming.

When we arrive at her home, she is busy drying beans she recently harvested. Around her homestead are gardens of cassava, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes and a thriving banana plantation.

"I can hardly lack food these days," she says with a smile.

Tigabasa lives with her sickly 60-year-old daughter and ten grandchildren. Providing enough food for such a large household is not easy, but she says age has never stopped her from gardening to feed her family. Below her house lies a banana plantation that has become a vital source of food. As she slowly walks with a stooped posture toward her kitchen garden, she points to the vegetables that have transformed both her diet and health.

"I used to get dizzy all the time, but since I started eating greens, my life has changed for the better," she says.

LIFE BEFORE THE KITCHEN GARDEN

For Tigabasa, food security was once a distant dream. The 80-year-old recalls days when her family often went hungry because there was simply not enough food at home.

Asked how they survived then, she says she worked in neighbours' gardens and earned either sh4,000 or food in return. "It was difficult. We did not have enough food to eat," she recalls. A few metres from Tigabasa's home lives Hope Tukahabwa. When we visit her home, she is seated under a tree with her husband and children, sharing a meal of mashed matooke and beans.

"We never used to enjoy meals like this because we did not have enough food," she says.

Although she says her family is still striving for greater food security, she believes they have made significant progress.

"Our children are healthy. At least they are not stunted. As you can see, they all look healthy," her husband, Emmanuel Burora, says.



Ministry of Health



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COMMUNITY NURSERY BEDS

Stories like those of Tigabasa and Tukahabwa are becoming increasingly common in Bunyangabu thanks to interventions aimed at improving food security and nutrition.

"For many families, a meal often consisted of nothing more than plain matooke. Vegetables were scarce, diets lacked diversity and malnutrition remained a persistent challenge, especially among women and children," Louis Twinamatsiko, a field extension officer at KRC-Uganda, says.

To address the challenge, KRC-Uganda, through the Food Security for Family Farmers Through Agro-ecology programme, helped communities establish nursery beds where households jointly raise vegetable seedlings before transplanting them into kitchen gardens. Under the initiative, groups of about ten households manage a shared nursery bed. Once the seedlings mature, they are distributed among members for planting at home.

The programme also provides technical support and nutrition education to participating households.

WOMEN AT THE CENTRE OF NUTRITION

Twinamatsiko says the programme deliberately targets women, who make up about 75% of the beneficiaries.

"We target women because they prepare food and take care of children. If you want to teach good nutrition, teach women because they are at the centre of it," he says. Before the intervention, many



Hope Tigabasa, a resident of Kajumiro A village in Katinga Town Council, Bunyangabu district, in her backyard garden

SMALL SPACES, BIG HARVESTS

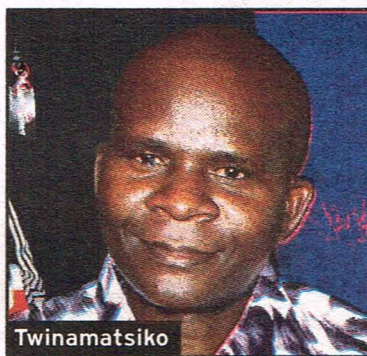
Ester Kwagalakwe, an extension officer in Bunyangabu district, says small spaces can produce enough vegetables to improve household nutrition.

"We give them [households] seeds and seedlings and teach them modern farming methods, including urban farming for those with limited land," she says.

According to Kwagalakwe, through practical gardening demonstrations, many residents are learning to maximise small spaces so as to yield significant harvests.

"We tell them that if you have a small piece of land, you can use buckets and sacks to farm," she explains.

The approach has proven particularly useful for elderly people and households with limited land. By using sacks, buckets and other locally available containers, families are now growing vegetables close to their homes thus ensuring year-round access to nutritious food.



Twinamatsiko

households lacked access to vegetables and other nutritious foods.

"The situation was worse. In some households, people did not even have *dodo* [*amaranth* leaves]. Their nutrition was poor," Twinamatsiko explains.

"We had people eating matooke only for a whole week. A person would cook matooke with nothing added to it and eat," he adds.

Today, many families are growing vegetables, such as *dodo* and other nutrient-rich crops in their compounds, improving both food availability and dietary diversity.

TEACHING FAMILIES WHAT TO GROW

The community has also benefited from support provided by Ruja Community Church through its Bread



Kwagalakwe

for Life project, which targets widows, elderly women and single mothers.

"We target these groups because they are among the most vulnerable people in the community," Robert Tumwesigye, the founder of Ruja Initiative Uganda, says.

According to Tumwesigye, poor nutrition in the area is not always caused by a lack of land or farming ability. Instead, many households lack knowledge about healthy food combinations. "People have no knowledge of what to eat and what to plant," he says.

He explains that many farmers prioritise crops that generate income while neglecting those needed for household consumption. As a result, many families sell their harvests,

but remain nutritionally vulnerable because vegetables and other essential foods are missing from their diets.

To address this challenge, Ruja Initiative Uganda trains households in backyard farming and encourages the establishment of kitchen gardens close to their homes.

PROMOTING HAND-WASHING IN SCHOOLS

As part of efforts to improve hygiene and prevent disease, Elizabeth Kobugabe, the District Nutrition Focal Person, says the district has prioritised hand-washing promotion in schools. The initiative aims to instil lifelong hygiene habits among learners from an early age.

"We have promoted hand-washing in every school so that our children can grow up knowing that washing hands is part of their daily lives," Kobugabe says. Faced with limited funding, the district has adopted a strategy of main-streaming nutrition activities into existing government programmes. This approach allows nutrition interventions to continue despite financial constraints.

Kobugabe notes that the district has also established nutrition committees from the district level down to the parish level to co-ordinate nutrition-related activities and mobilise communities.

"We have main-streamed our nutrition activities because we do not have enough funds and we have created district nutrition committees up to the parish level," she says.

LACK OF LOCAL NUTRITION DATA

Despite ongoing interventions, Bunyangabu district faces a major challenge in monitoring nutrition trends due to a lack of locally generated data.

"The district has never conducted its own data collection on nutrition statistics, so we depend on national data," Kobugabe reveals.

She says the absence of district-specific data makes it difficult to accurately assess the local nutrition situation and measure the impact of interventions.