



## A return to traditional food?

*More and more people in Africa are suffering from famine. Rising prices make imported food unaffordable for the poorer population. A successful project in Kenya encourages the population to grow and eat traditional vegetables.*

### A LOSS OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE

For centuries, despite droughts and floods, the peoples of Africa fed themselves and developed diverse and healthy culinary cultures using indigenous vegetables, herbs, spices and fruits. The colonial powers brought their European way of life to Africa, which was adopted by the wealthy and educated classes. Traditional food was long considered a sign of poverty and backwardness. With the European way of eating, diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer also spread. To combat the prejudices against traditional food, research institutes, community organizations and government agencies in Kenya developed an interesting project in 1995.

### HIGH QUALITY FOOD

In an initial phase, 24 varieties of the 210 vegetables used in Africa were evaluated for their acceptability, marketability and impact on health. Many traditional plants were found to have higher nutritional value than the three most popular vegetables: cabbage, kale (called sukuma wiki) and chard.

- The leaves of the spider plant provide many times more vitamin A than cabbage. Amaranth contains up to 12 times as much iron and calcium and almost twice as much fiber as cabbage.
- The leaves of cassava, an important vegetable in Central African countries, are rich in protein and vitamin A.
- The pulp of the baobab tree can provide up to ten times as much vitamin C as oranges.
- Insects, such as flying termites, and birds, such as quail, are an important source of protein, as are mushrooms, of which there are hundreds of edible species.

These and many other crops protect against an unbalanced diet, prevent widespread malnutrition among children, and prevent disease.

### A SUCCESS STORY

In a second phase, the seeds of the different varieties were collected, improved and distributed to interested parties. Experts propagated the advantages of the old varieties, advised farmers on cultivation, provided cooking recipes for preparation and helped farmers to market their products.

Slowly, the tide turned. Supermarkets began to offer traditional vegetables. Negative attitudes began to change. Today, traditional leafy vegetables such as mchicha, managu and saga are commonplace in restaurants, street markets and homes. And there is no longer a stigma attached to their consumption.

UNESCO became aware of the successful campaign in Kenya. At a 2021 conference, the project was presented and made publicly available on the list of practices for the protection of cultural heritage. The information provides an incentive for other countries to start similar projects.

### A CULTURAL HERITAGE

Producing, processing and enjoying food is more than just an economic activity. It is an expression of a culture and a way of life. With a thoughtless adoption of European food culture, some of the African cultural identity is lost. One goal of the project was to contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage by reviving traditional food. The dangers of too much dependence on imported food are currently being felt through consequences of the Ukraine war. Many countries imported wheat from Ukraine. With rapidly rising world market prices, many foods are becoming unaffordable for poorer populations. Increased local production of traditional varieties can reduce this dependence.

The intangible heritage in traditional foods includes knowledge, social practices, skills, language, beliefs and taboos related to food. All these constitute the foodways of a cultural group. Foodways also include knowledge and practices about producing and using food, and encompass recipes, decorative skills, names of food species and uses of food in ceremonies. Patrick Maundu

