



1.10 Promote women-led enterprises to grow and sell nutritious but neglected crops

The Solution: Enabling Innovators of Women-led Enterprises for Nutritious but Neglected Crops will support women currently facing poverty and inequality to create small enterprises, generating economic empowerment and agency in decision-making in producing, selling, and eating nutritious foods. It consists of: (a) leadership programmes for innovators at the community level, (b) small-scale women-led enterprises designed to work in local contexts, and (c) nature-friendly food production. At its heart is developing women-led food enterprises with an explicit nutrition-related purpose.

Source of the Solution: A member of the group, Maureen Muketha (founder of Tule Vyema, a community-based organisation providing nutrition education and training on growing underutilised, indigenous plant species to women in Kenya) initiated the idea. Based on her project's experience, Maureen developed the idea supported by a small subgroup of the AT1 working group for nutritious foods. Input was also provided by Alessandro Meschinelli of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation.

Problem addressed within food systems: Food systems fail to deliver to the world's most nutritionally and financially vulnerable people. Low, variable, and unpredictable incomes limit the foods that women can afford and access. Many of these women have minimal access to social protection programmes. This leads to inadequate intake of nutritious foods, placing the women and their children at risk of diet-related NCDs, micronutrient deficiencies, and child stunting. Due to structural barriers and inequalities, women have inadequate agency in food systems. They often lack economic empowerment, the ability to generate and control earnings, and the information and resources needed to become more economically empowered.

How this solution will address that problem: Catalysing women-led enterprises will economically empower low-income women and increase decision-making power about what to grow, sell, and feed their families. Such enterprises can change social norms and mindsets, as women would gain agency in making decisions, acquire feelings of self-respect and self-efficacy, and have greater respect from their families and communities. They – and their families – would then, directly or indirectly, have the capacity and opportunity to eat more nutritious foods. Turning this theory into practice would take four interlinked inputs:

- *Enabling innovators.* The initial input is empowering innovators within communities to establish women-led enterprises through regional-level incubators, challenge funds, or hubs. Local innovators are crucial for ensuring enterprises can work in local contexts, considering gender relations and the nature of local markets.
- *Women-led enterprises.* Depending on local contexts, activities could include capacity building fora, distributing seeds, production, adding value along the value chain, distributing and/or selling. The innovators would establish enterprises to engage women in activities based on identified solutions in their local contexts with the community's full ownership and trust.
- *Nutritious, profitable crops.* These would vary by context, but neglected crops have promise. First, some of them are highly nutritious. Second, while demand may be limited in the absence of efforts to develop wider markets, profitable local markets can often exist (owing to perceptions of health benefits). Third, these crops are typically not favoured by men, so women face lower barriers to entry, thereby overcoming embedded structural gender inequalities. Women tend to hold traditional knowledge about how to prepare the crops. Fourth, there is potential to add value to these crops through processing to create new business opportunities and income.



- *Raising awareness and access to markets.* Marketing campaigns designed to increase the appeal of the crops and connect supply with market demand, such as local school food programmes and social protection programmes (Solutions 3, 11, and 12).

Given the intention is that these enterprises would grow and succeed with women at the forefront, this would need to be accompanied by complementary game changers. For example, women's ability to travel to receive cash for their crops may be restricted by cultural prohibitions, or cash may be taken away from them by male household heads. Moreover, men often capture the benefits of agricultural development as it becomes more successful, necessitating action to support women's control over their income and their access to services. Supporting solutions include self-help groups for women's savings, mobile money apps (requiring efforts to increase women's access to mobile phones and associated services).

Solution's alignment to the 'game changing and systemic solution' criteria: is the solution is likely to be game-changing in that women-led enterprises based on neglected food crops may transfer agency to women so they are active protagonists in their own development and that of food systems rather than being passive recipients of external 'solutions' or doing the work without the decision-making. Placing women in the lead would allow them to unleash their ingenuity to find creative solutions to challenges. Giving women a voice can also change mindsets about gender roles in food systems, changing some of the underlying rules for a more equitable and nutritious food system.

Impact potential at scale: enabling the innovators creates the potential for hundreds of local initiatives, which can learn from each other via peer-to-peer learning.

Actionability: there are existing successful examples (see below).

Sustainability: local ownership would support sustainability.

Co-benefits to the primary goal include generating income and creating jobs and business opportunities, thus advancing equitable livelihoods; supporting sustainable consumption (low carbon footprint of the food), nature-friendly food production (minimal use of pesticides), and resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses (drought-resistant crops); and benefitting (low-income) women through economic empowerment, greater equality, and better nutrition.

Existing evidence: There are several successful examples of women's enterprises growing neglected species. Examples of different elements of the approach include the Pacific Breadfruit and Seed Initiative of the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network; India's first smart food reality show and Smart Food Campaign of ICRISAT (on finger millet and sorghum); Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) India initiative on finger millet; Kuli Kuli, Inc., which works directly with women's cooperatives and small family farmers; and Tule Vyema. Evidence indicates that while women's autonomy in agricultural production and control over income decisions may not necessarily improve women's diets in resource-poor settings, household dietary diversity and child nutrition often do improve.

Current/likely political support: The goal would be to build on existing efforts in countries in Asia, East Africa, and Latin America. A coalition around this idea has begun to be formed with AT3. The next phase of the work by AT1 is developing a plan to build on the global actions.

Contexts for which this is well suited: As this solution aims to empower women with limited livelihood options and living in poverty, as well as those already producing neglected crops, it is suited to these contexts.