

‘Eat What You Grow’ changes nutrition beliefs and behaviour in Sierra Leone

Inspired by participation in SUN CSN’s Learning Route in Rwanda, [SUNI-CSP Sierra Leone](#) has changed beliefs and behaviour on nutrition in one rural community.

Vulnerable farmers in a community in northern Sierra Leone are starting to consume some of their own produce and change key nutrition habits as a result of a project inspired by SUN CSN’s learning exchange programme.

In November 2016, Sierra Leone’s Scaling Up Nutrition and Immunisation – Civil Society Platform (SUNI-CSP) was one of nine national civil society alliances (CSAs) that participated in the week-long Africa Learning Route exchange visit to Rwanda.



Figure 1 Cooking potato leave sauce in Senekedugu community

The final step of the structured learning route process was for all participating CSAs to develop an ‘Innovation Plan’ based on their learning and reflection on approaches that could be replicated in their own country. SUNI-CSP’s Innovation Plan was called ‘Eat What You Grow’ and it was inspired by two of the examples of best practice showcased during the Rwanda learning visit.

Seed funding for innovation

‘Eat What You Grow’ was one of three innovation plans that won seed funding from SUN CSN. Combining the funding with money raised in Sierra Leone, SUNI-CSP has now successfully carried out their plans in one community. There is evidence that nutrition behaviour has changed as a result of the programme, which challenged a number of traditional food taboos that were harming mothers and children in particular. SUNI-CSP now plan to scale-up this approach across the district.

The six month project targeted around 2,000 people in Senekedugu, which is in the Wara Wara Yagala chiefdom in the northern Koinadugu District. Communities like Senekedugu suffer from some of the highest malnutrition rates in the country, which particularly high rates for stunting.

Vegetables are commonly grown in the community, but most produce is sold to wholesalers rather than consumed locally – for economic reasons and because of traditional beliefs. The project aimed to raise awareness of the need for families to keep a portion of the vegetable crops for family consumption and to give them recipes for healthy meals.

Challenging traditional beliefs about food

During the project, community meetings with the project team, district health workers and other stakeholders had revealed a number of beliefs about certain foods, including: that pregnant women should not eat plantain as it would have detrimental effect on the child; lactating mothers should not eat meat for fear of them getting a swollen stomach; and children under five should not be allowed to eat bananas and eggs so that they don't steal food in the future. Beliefs such as these were part of wider issue of generally poor nutrition. The project used a range of mechanisms to challenge beliefs and encourage the community to adopt healthier cooking and eating habits.

Hawa Kabba an elder in the Senekedugu community told the project team: “We never knew we were depriving ourselves and our children from nutritious food by believing in all these sayings. The most amazing thing is that we never once tried to prove whether these sayings are true or false, we just believed them as they were passed to us by our descendants. We now have the knowledge and I am sure we will be eating fruits and vegetables and also feeding our children with them so that they can grow well.”

Engaging with the community

To kick-start the project, the SUNI-CSP team in the district began by meeting with all key local stakeholders, including representatives of Koinadugu District Council, community leaders and health workers. In addition, a survey was carried across more than 100 households to gather data such as the numbers of pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under five living in the community.

A mother-to-mother (M2M) support group was formed as a key mechanism for changing behaviour. Some of the mothers became nutrition champions and were trained, alongside community health workers, by the district nutritionist and the nurse in charge of the Senekedugu Community Health centre. The two-day session covered healthy nutrition, how to effectively disseminate key nutrition messages and how to gather feedback at community and district level.

Inspired by one of the best practice examples they had visited in Rwanda, SUNI-CSP's 'Eat What You Grow' also used community radio to promote healthy nutrition. The project featured in three radio programmes, focusing on key nutrition messages including the importance of keeping some of the vegetable crop for family consumption and cooking healthy, balanced meals.

Cooking demonstrations to showcase healthy dishes

A key activity of the M2M support group was cooking demonstrations to showcase different nutritious dishes that could be prepared with locally-grown ingredients. Different dishes were cooked including rice and potato leaves, vegetable salad and cabbage sauce. Lactating mothers were also shown how to prepare Bennimix weaning porridge which they could give their babies from six months onwards.

The cooking demonstrations were popular and attracted participants from Senekedugu and all its six catchment communities. The sessions were very participatory as the facilitators ensured that everyone played an active role in the process. After the dishes were prepared, they were tasted by every participant. Generally, the new dishes were appreciated by the people taking part.

Scaling-up across the district

The project managed to reach not only the people in Senekedugu but also (through the radio programmes and other activities) seven other communities who all access their health services through the centre in Senekedugu. Some other neighbouring communities were very interested and wanted to join the exercise, but they were not catered for.

SUNI-CSP aims to address this by scaling-up the 'Eat What You Grow' approach across the whole of the Koinadugu district before rolling out to other districts. Future iterations of the project will seek to address a low turn-out by men at the 'Eat What You Grow' pilot in Senekedugu.

More info contact: <https://www.facebook.com/sunicpspl>



Figure 2 SUNI CSP and Senekedugu Community – Wara wara yagala Chiefdom