

# Stories from the Field

**Alessandra Grasso, a US Borlaug Fellow, has spent the past 5 months in Busia County, Kenya working with local communities to raise awareness of the value of biodiversity for food and nutrition.**

**Here, in the second of a series of stories from the field, Alessandra shares her experience of the traditional food-based approaches community health workers are promoting to tackle malnutrition and improve social and economic status in a region affected by climate-related shocks and stresses.**



*Photo: Alessandra Grasso*

In Busia County, Kenya, malnutrition is a staggering problem, especially for women, children and people living with HIV/AIDs. Many households subsist on farming activities and are negatively affected by the unpredictable climate, contributing to a vicious cycle of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition.

In response, the Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition (BFN) Project is working with the Department of Health and Community Health Workers (CHWs) to establish demonstration gardens in seven community health units or dispensaries throughout Busia County. The aim is to provide healthy food to the most vulnerable (women, children, elderly and ill), and to teach households climate-smart sustainable gardening technologies for improved dietary diversity.

CHWs are the frontline health workers in Kenya, consisting of Community Health Extension Workers (CHEWs) and Community Health Volunteers (CHVs). Selected by their respective village, CHWs are based out of the dispensary units, the lowest tier health facility. Each CHW provides care to one hundred homes, even the most remote.

CHWs may be a vessel to disseminate kitchen gardening technologies and food processing and preservation methods, as they provide health promotion and health monitoring services and interact with community members, most commonly women. They have the potential to increase knowledge of the nutritional value of under-utilized traditional foods, recipes and cooking methods for increased diet diversity, resulting in better absorption of nutrients, sustainable income-generating activities and enhanced food security throughout the year.

**“Community health workers are taking a food-based approach to combat malnutrition by sensitizing the community to the nutritional value of locally available foods and to advanced, yet cheap and sustainable, methods to prepare, grow, harvest and cook healthy foods for themselves and their families.”**

*- Alessandra Grasso*



Photo: Alessandra Grasso

Community health workers from Busibwabo Dispensary Unit in Matayos Sub-County standing amongst their BFN demonstration plot.

Seven health units in seven Sub-counties of Busia have been identified to establish demonstration gardens for CHWs to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity for food and nutrition. With BFN assisting with the Training of Trainers (ToT) workshops and seed provision for local and traditional vegetables, each community health unit contributed human capacity and local resources and assets, such as land, tree seedlings, gardening hoes and sticks for fences, to establish a teaching garden.

In Matayos Sub-County, CHWs at Busibwabo Dispensary Unit are taking their demonstration plot a step further by displaying healthy traditional leafy vegetables using various kitchen gardening technologies, such as keyhole, mandala, multi-storey, tumbukiza and raised gardens. The Unit is currently harvesting spring onions, amaranths, slender leaves, pumpkin leaves, cowpeas, spider plant, black nightshade, vine spinach and African kales. Given the County's vulnerability to climate change and increasing population pressures, kitchen garden technologies provide opportunities for individuals, particularly women, to own a successful kitchen garden abundant with nutrient-rich traditional foods.

The CHWs are taking a food-based approach to combat malnutrition, sensitizing the community to the nutritional value of locally available foods and to advanced, yet cheap and sustainable, methods to prepare, grow, harvest and cook healthy foods for themselves and their families.

If you would like to know more about home gardening technologies, our BFN "Training of Trainers: A Guide to Gardening Technologies" outlines strategies for successful garden construction depending on the space, time, resources, materials and environmental climate.



## From the Source



Photo: Alessandra Grasso

George Ekesa (second from the right), a CHW and a BFN ToT from Khayo Dispensary Unit in Nambale Sub-County shares in an interview with Alessandra how members of his community have benefited from the introduction of kitchen gardening technologies and nutrition education, along with his hopes for furthering development and building capacity in Nambale.

*"I am happy Khayo Dispensary was chosen for this project because there is a lack of knowledge of kitchen gardening technologies and the types of vegetables to improve nutritional status. So far, we planted vine spinach, jute mallow, spider plant, dual purpose amaranths, black nightshade and slender leaf. We are teaching proper spacing between plants and the nutritional value of the local vegetables, we are promoting diversity in gardens and diets. Next season, we plan to teach one or two kitchen gardening technologies, like mandala or keyhole. Eventually, we would like to buy a greenhouse for the Unit and grow enough to feed the sick at the Unit and sell to the community. When people come to the Unit for healthcare, I like to take them to the garden to show them what we are doing. As a CHW, I practice what I learn at the Unit at my home as well. If we can pass this knowledge and skills to the community, I believe that biodiversity will greatly improve health and well-being of citizens in Nambale Sub-County."*