

# WILD AND TRADITIONAL FOODS RECOVERY IN GUATEMALA, NICARAGUA, UGANDA AND ZIMBABWE

Trócaire

## A SUMMARY OF TRÓCAIRE'S WORK

Centring seeds as a spiritual, cultural and nutritional good, rather than simply an agricultural input or tradable commodity, this report focuses on initiatives for the recovery of wild and traditional foods across four countries where Trócaire works: Guatemala and Nicaragua in Central America and Uganda and Zimbabwe in Africa. Despite the cultural, climatic and geographical diversity of these contexts, the organisations and peoples working towards the recovery of wild and traditional foods have a number of things in common. They recognise the importance of food sovereignty in the face of increasing climatic instability and other crises which impact peoples' ability to access sufficient affordable and nutritious food. They are striving to recover the regard for wild and traditional foods which have been forgotten or devalued over time, particularly where these have been displaced by imported and/or non-native staples. They recognise the recovery of wild and traditional foods as representing more than sustainability, but the recovery of the communal experience of growing and sharing food. They know that recovering wild and traditional foods is not only beneficial for the people but for the planet as well.

The recovery of wild and traditional foods is taking place within a policy environment which continues to favour industrial scale agriculture. This focuses on the production of high-yield monocrops (e.g. maize, wheat, rice) for sale and export and the increasing pressure for farmers to adopt non-native, hybrid and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) which often require further investment in chemical inputs (fertilizer and pesticides). Small holder, campesino and indigenous farmers are often overlooked, or indeed marginalised, in government policies and donor initiatives which seek to address food security through technical fixes, focusing on scaling-up rather than supporting families and communities to become self-sustaining and food sovereign.



**Interventions:** Through work with a diversity of local partners in projects across these four countries the initiatives to recover wild and traditional foods include:

- **Resource Mapping:** Communities are supported to map all the edible and medicinal plants in their locality, as well as register their uses and how to prepare them. This helps communities realise the wealth of resources they already have at their disposal and the potential for improving their food security and developing sustainable sources of income.
- **Agroecological Practices:** Multi-cropping, composting and water harvesting are just some of the practices supported to encourage families and communities to be able to produce a diversity of crops, suited to local environmental conditions.
- **Community Seed Banks:** These ensure that local genetic diversity is safeguarded and that farmers can access affordable seed through the collection and safe storage of seeds.
- **Training & Education:** Classes and workshops on the nutritional value of wild and traditional food are essential for restoring peoples' confidence in these foods as well as learning ways to harvest, cook and process these foods for consumption and sale.



- **Learning, training and advocacy** with communities helps to shift positively attitudes about the palatability and health benefits of small grains, leafy greens and other wild and traditional in comparison to monocultures.
- **Water harvesting and storage is essential**, particularly in Nicaragua, Uganda and Zimbabwe where drought effects major regions in these countries, to water both wild and traditional crops in smaller diversified plots.
- **Food fairs and exchanges** have contributed greatly to breaking down lingering prejudices, misconceptions and even stigma surrounding wild and traditional foods while promoting their diverse medicinal and culinary uses and their commercial potential.

- **Communal food initiatives** contribute greatly to the recovery of community spirit around the exchange of seeds and the enjoyment of food.
- **Gender imbalances** in shares of family income, decision-making power and the burden of labour continue to be a feature across the four countries due to deeply embedded gender norms and discrimination towards women farmers in terms of land ownership and participation in public spaces.
- These are **long term processes**; therefore it is important to strike a balance between income generation, food sovereignty and social promotion. Agroecology is a way of life and not just a productive practice.

- The continued promotion of **seed banks** could be further strengthened, with emphasis on suitable construction and storage equipment.
- As many wild and traditional foods are collected and processed by women, particularly plants such as finger millet or shea nut, **tools for more efficient harvesting** and processing should be developed to reduce the burden of labour on women.
- **Dispel myths** around agroecology which continue to persist including: agroecology opposes science and innovation; it cannot be expanded and is subsistence oriented; and it is incompatible with markets.
- **Community research** should be promoted because scientific research is needed and multidisciplinary networks should be created to collaborate and strengthen the work done.
- **The corporate food regime** should be challenged through advocacy and awareness-raising so that communities are supported in their efforts towards food sovereignty.





- Support must be specialised and focus on the **empowerment of women**. Specific practical issues should also be addressed, e.g. the limited access to childcare as a barrier to women's participation, burden of labour, participation in decision-making processes, representation of women's interests in local, regional and national level advocacy.
- The recovery of wild and traditional foods should be understood as **processes which are built over time**, often requiring periods of transition from standard agricultural practices such as monocropping and dependencies on hybrid or GMO seeds, or those supported by government schemes, so it is important that families are aware of the long-term benefits and supported throughout the period of transition.



## CONCLUSION

The recovery of wild and traditional foods may seem like a common-sense approach to sustainability and food security and yet the initiatives described in this report could easily be considered contra cultural, if not radical. These efforts challenge the logics of industrial scale agriculture, the pressure to use generic 'improved' seeds and the continued encroachment on the already marginal lands where indigenous, campesinos and smallholder farmers live.

The interventions documented in this report demonstrate how, with support, farmers can sustain and recover genetic resource diversity which contributes to food and nutrition security and thus more resilient lifestyles. They can become, in turn, more resilient in the face of external shocks provoked by climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and market fluctuations. Great strides have been made by these communities however, more could be achieved with a favourable policy environment. Governments, including donor governments, and relevant state institutions could support the cultivation of wild foods, traditional species and varietal initiatives over practices which force farmers to rely on only a few market-oriented crops which require chemical inputs and often lead to indebtedness.