

Small grants schemes to empower self-assistance ideas from women and youth groups contributing to improved production and healthier diets - experience from the NICE project in Kenya & Rwanda

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While overweight and obesity are increasing worldwide, food security levels are worsening in many low- and middle-income countries – especially with the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the persisting climate crisis. Due to suboptimal diets, one-third of the world's population suffers from malnutrition nowadays. Also, particularly in the urban setting, many people experience a pronounced shift away from traditional staples such as millet or pulses towards staples prepared more conveniently (rice, pasta, or bread), or high-sugar foods. This is a result of changes in lifestyles including, but not limited to, moving out of a farming household, different relative prices for food, and often increased income. Nutrition literacy, the knowledge about diversified diets, and attractiveness of several healthy and nutritious food items are also often poor.

Nutritious and agroecologically produced foods offer the potential to improve diets, transform food systems and alleviate pressure on the environment. The Nutrition in City Ecosystems (NICE) project aims to improve nutrition for city populations through agricultural, food and health sector collaborations and a better linkage of supply and demand for nutritious and agroecologically produced food. Furthermore, the NICE project is also looking to support women and youth engaged in the city food system to contribute to the urban food systems transformations through initiatives towards diversified diets through local production.

Women and youth play a key, but under-recognised and often informal, role in city food systems where they may lead growing, processing, and marketing of foods, while also carrying the responsibility for their family's healthy nutrition. Women and youth's role and representation in food system governance, decision-making, and access to productive resources are often limited, leaving them with only few opportunities to influence and get fairer returns from a food system that largely depends on them to function.



Figure 1: NICE small grant applicants in Bungoma, Kenya, during a joint training session on proposal writing and how to implement projects successfully (photo credit SFSA Kenya).

To empower self-assistance ideas of motivated women and youth groups contributing to more diversified, and thus healthier diets, the NICE project started to provide financial assistance through a mixed financial and in-kind granting system in Kenya and Rwanda. The premise is that by providing start-up support to women and youth, they can put their promising ideas into practice, fostering entrepreneurship and sustainable food system transformation.

In close collaboration with the county authorities of the cities of Bungoma and Busia, in Kenya, as well as Rubavu and Rusizi city-districts in Rwanda, six and eight well-functioning but otherwise unsupported women and youth self-assistance groups were invited to prepare a proposal for the NICE small grants in Kenya in September 2022 and in Rwanda in January 2023. The grants aim to improve food production and make diets more diversified, and had to be complemented by a contribution from the groups themselves. Invited applicants underwent a dedicated program to develop and budget their proposal, also receiving inputs on good nutrition practices in general, project management, and information for sharing and networking among themselves.



Figure 2: NICE branded three-wheel motorcycle provided to the GIRIMPUHWE widows' cooperative to support production and faster transportation of their vegetables and fruits ("Sarura ucuruze byihuse") thus improving their livelihood (photo credit: Swiss TPH Rwanda)

All but one of the invited women and youth groups are now implementing their activities. Through regular visits (bi-weekly check-ins) from the NICE city coordinators, small grant recipients were closely accompanied through the three-months granting period to ensure adequate use of the supplied inputs. Unfortunately, the heavy floods in the Western Province, Rwanda, in May 2023, destroyed the horticulture activities that had been initiated by two supported groups in Rubavu, and this situation is now receiving focused attention.

Meanwhile, the following are all proceeding well: increased acreage for first-cycle production of African Leafy Vegetables for the *Walatsi Locational Self-help Group* in Busia, Kenya; support for kitchen garden construction for peri-urban families through the *Baho Neza Muryango youth group* in Rubavu, Rwanda; a new transport vehicle for the GIRIMPUHWE widows cooperative selling self-cultivated fruits and vegetables in different markets in Rubavu, Rwanda; contributions to increased irrigation possibilities for the CCPGK cooperative in Rusizi; support to set up chicken feed production at the *Neo-Hen farms youth social enterprise* in Bungoma, Kenya.



Figure 3: Members of the Baho Neza Muryango youth group constructed a kitchen garden together with a local family in their peri-urban neighbourhood (photo credit: Swiss TPH Rwanda)

A second round of small grants in the Kenyan and Rwandan NICE cities is already planned, with a next round of groups being identified and invited.