

Food Change Labs Transform Local Food Systems in Uganda and Zambia

Mangiza Chirwa
Immaculate Yossa

To support citizens in shaping a green and inclusive food systems, the NGOs Hivos and International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), in cooperation with local partners, have set up several food change labs in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These food labs have been developed under Sustainable Diets for All (SD4ALL), a lobby and advocacy programme that harnesses citizen voices for healthy, diverse, nutritious and sustainable food systems.

A Food Change Lab (FCL) is a participatory innovation process that aims to better understand problems in the food system, build coalitions of change, generate solutions, and test them on the ground. The process is ideal for addressing complex issues which encompass a myriad of actors, facets and policies. It is designed to promote systemic change, shifting food systems towards more inclusivity and sustainability. Though following the same process and principles, the labs in Zambia and Uganda had their own unique set-up and content focus, leading to a rich pallet of results.

The food change lab and food policy council concepts are similar in that both are multi-stakeholder platforms but they differ mainly in the process and methodology they use for attaining desired outcomes. The food change lab is a problem-solving process where a multi-stakeholder alliance moves through different phases – from problem identification to ideation and prototyping of solutions.

Zambia Food Change Lab

The Zambia Food Change Lab began in Chongwe District at the local level. It was set up in 2015 to address the problem of limited diversity on Zambian farms and in local diets. The Chongwe Food Lab soon evolved into the Zambia Food Change Lab in 2016, which was broader in scope and looked at national challenges in the Zambian food system. This occurred after adding partners with a national focus and realising that agricultural policy issues were quite central to achieving change in the local food system. The national-level lab developed a food system map to identify challenges and opportunities for change in production, consumption, processing and access to food. From this mapping, they formed four prototype groups to address selected challenges where points of leverage had been identified. The four groups, whose members were from the national lab, focused on



Cooking demonstration by Orugali women. Photo by KRC

production diversification, youth empowerment, awareness creation and informal sector support, led by Hivos partner organisations with expertise in each thematic area.

One of the key achievements of the awareness group (led by the Consumer Unity Trust Society) was to form a partnership with the Lusaka City Council to work together on food issues concerning the city. This has enabled the formation of the Lusaka Food Policy Council (FPC) that will coordinate the efforts to address challenges within the Lusaka food system.

From local to national level

The lab's journey, from its early days as the Chongwe Food Lab (local level) to the Zambia Food Change Lab (national level), and the initiative to form the Lusaka FPC, was a rich learning experience marked by different interventions at the two levels. While both labs addressed food and nutrition issues, the Chongwe lab interventions were more concrete and easier to link with outcomes. For example, in its efforts to address unsustainable land management and deforestation, the Chongwe Food Lab participated in various activities involving community awareness and reforestation. This resulted in community leaders introducing penalties for anyone found cutting down trees, as well as capacity building in reforestation through Hivos funding to Kasisi Agriculture Training Institute, leading to reduced deforestation in the area. Regarding lack of diversity in food consumption, food festivals and food dialogue meetings resulted in community radio programmes aimed at creating awareness of the nutritional value of local crops and food that are currently disappearing. Furthermore, a book on the value of local food

	Chongwe Food Change Lab	City Region Food System
Food System Assessment	The assessment was specific to a local area (rural) and identified local priority issues for Chongwe.	The assessment for the city region was broader in scope involving the identified cities and the nearby peri-urban/rural areas. The surrounding districts, responsible for the main food supply of Lusaka, were included in the assessment.
Multi-Stakeholder participation	Involved participation of ordinary community members in identifying challenges and possible solutions. Community members took centre stage, whereas other stakeholders provided expert knowledge in guiding the assessment and strategy build up.	Participation mainly involved key stakeholders across the food sector who had technical expertise in their fields of work. While institutional actors and technical experts took centre stage, ordinary community members were involved as respondents to the research done by the project.
Level of Intervention	Direct intervention actions included community awareness programmes/ information dissemination in the local community (e.g. on effects of deforestation on agriculture production, food festivals to address food diversity consumption, tree planting to combat deforestation, etc.).	Major outcomes were policy recommendations and action plans for government and concerned stakeholders but no direct implementation actions to address identified challenges were taken.
Others	All food lab participants took part in field visits aimed at increasing their appreciation of existing challenges and opportunities within the food system.	The approach used thematic working groups to thoroughly assess specific challenges and come up with strategies and action plans for interventions.

Contrasts between the two approaches.

was developed to promote the consumption of selected traditional foods of high nutritional value.

In contrast, within the Chongwe Food Change Lab it has been more difficult to ascertain whether or not claimed outcomes are actually the result of prototype group interventions, as there are numerous players and interventions in the food system at national level. For this reason, the Lusaka FPC will be subsequently created at city level, in order to show outcomes and impact more easily. Local food governance initiatives such as Lusaka FPC using food change labs are a good mechanism to address specific local challenges. For instance, research in Lusaka has shown that more than 70 % of the population acquire their food from informal markets, and yet informal sector players do not take part in policy discussions. The Lusaka FPC provides an opportunity for these neglected groups to make their voices heard. It is often difficult for marginalised groups to access national-level platforms, as these usually attract more formal actors and discussions. Additionally, the Lusaka FPC provides an opportunity to institutionalise the experiences gained from the two food change labs. Institutionalisation entails creating an avenue through which policies and innovations discussed in the policy council find their way to authorities responsible for action. This improves the chances of sustainability beyond the project lifespan.

Towards an integrated approach

It is important to note that food change labs are a form of basic intervention in the food system operating at local community level, whereas food policy councils move one step further as they generally operate at local government level. The majority of food governance interventions in Zambia have been at national level.

In 2015, the Food and Agriculture Organization and RUAF, through the Food for the Cities Program, recognised the gap between local realities and national level interventions and introduced the City Region Food Systems (CRFS) project (See: www.fao.org/in-action/food-for-cities-programme/toolkit/introduction/en/). This approach includes linking the city food systems of Lusaka and Kitwe to surrounding peri-urban/rural populations that provide food for the cities. Though both the Chongwe Food Lab and the CRFS used a food system assessment as a starting point to better understand the strengths and challenges faced, as well as multi-stakeholder dialogue to discuss the assessment and build up strategies, there are still some major contrasts between the two approaches. (see figure)

The various approaches are complementary to one another and build up to enhance the performance of the food system as a whole. The findings of the Food Change Lab are used to inform the Lusaka FPC, CRFS and national food system interventions.

Putting ordinary citizens at the centre of the food system requires flexible local structures such as food change labs and local food councils to improve inclusion, but also stimulate further uptake and policy change on the ground that allow these citizens to easily participate. Farmers and informal sector workers are usually forgotten (or not acknowledged) in formal platforms addressing food system challenges, due to factors such as low levels of education and inability to speak in the official national language of communication (English). However, structures such as the food change lab and food policy councils provide a space where the voices of these neglected groups can be heard, which results in more meaningful and effective decision-making and interventions.



Zambia Food Change Lab participants creating the food system map. Photo by Felia Boerwinkel

Uganda Food Change Lab

The Uganda Food Change Lab started in 2015 with the aim of improving diets and the productivity of the local food system in Fort Portal Municipality and Kabarole District, while advocating a more conducive policy environment.

Food and agriculture play a leading role in Uganda's economy, with agriculture contributing 85 % of export earnings and almost 75 % to national employment. However, the country still struggles with food and nutrition insecurity. Undernutrition is widespread, with 36 % of children chronically undernourished or stunted. Malnutrition causes about 45 % of child deaths in Uganda. In an effort to improve the population's nutritional status, the Government of Uganda adopted the Food and Nutrition policy in 2003, comprising a series of multi-sectoral and coordinated interventions focusing on food security, improved nutrition and increased incomes. Owing to the multi-sectoral dimension of the policy, a coordinating body at the national level referred to as the 'Uganda Food and Nutrition Council' (UFNC) was proposed as a legal entity linked with relevant multi-sectoral committees dealing with food and nutrition at the local government level in the country. Sixteen years later, the Food and Nutrition Council has never been established. Despite several initiatives in Kampala (also see earlier UA magazines), the legislative framework has not been established.

In the absence of this council, a number of networks, organised groups and platforms have emerged, the majority citizen-led, to push the food agenda forward. Food and nutrition, natural resource protection, biodiversity conservation and safeguarding the country's food culture have been the topics at the forefront of discussions. The Uganda Food Change Lab was among these convening platforms and, linking to several of these local initiatives, initiated to address the country's key food challenges. These were: (1) the high amount of food and natural resources exported from the region, given the limited local processing and value addition options; (2) the high levels of stunting among children in the region, 41% higher than the national average; (3) the monotonous diet that is high in starch and low in proteins and micronutrients; and (4) the declining production of traditional crops despite their high nutritional value.

Through the food change lab, awareness raising among rural and urban households on diets and consumption patterns takes place regularly. This is spearheaded by a smaller group of actors that emerged out of the lab and referred to as the "coalition of the willing". They have organised community events such as cooking demonstrations showcasing, for instance, how key nutrients may be lost during food preparation, and talkshows to pass on information to the wider public. Some of the lab's other activities include food fests organised by rural households aimed to popularise the production and consumption of nutritious, indigenous foods, and small-scale farmer mobilisation to set up basic processing facilities to add value to their agricultural products.

The lab's convening organisation, the Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC), worked with the "coalition of the willing" and the council of elected leaders and the department of production to influence the review of a local policy on food production known as the Kabarole food and production ordinance 2006. The law had been passed but was not being implemented or enforced. KRC saw the review as an opportunity to propose amendments to support the inclusion of more diverse, nutritious and sustainable food in the local food system, in line with Hivos' Sustainable Diets for All agenda.

The most notable results of the Uganda Food Change Lab include stimulation of food diversity in the local economy through indigenous crops, which were previously perceived as inferior and low value crops. The volume of indigenous foods and vegetables planted in gardens and consumed at household level has increased considerably. Additionally, hoteliers are increasingly featuring traditional foods on their menus. Moreover, food vendors were mobilised to form an association, paving the way for their official recognition by the municipality. Lastly, the food and production ordinance was amended in 2018 with input from the lab actors. This amended ordinance is expected to improve agricultural production, food safety and storage, diets, household incomes (including recognising street food vendors as significant food providers for low income earners), the environment, and promote sustainable use of local natural resources.

Overall, the food change lab has provided opportunities for citizens to engage with their leaders and together build consensus on actions that need to be taken to improve their food and nutrition situation. This has led to more pragmatic and effective interventions and results. It is hoped that these examples can be replicated across the country.

Mangiza Chirwa

Hivos

mchirwa@hivos.org

Immaculate Yossa

Hivos

iyossa@hivos.org