

Addressing the gaps in sustainable consumption and production practices for Rwanda's rural populations

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Despite urbanizing at a rate of 6.4 percent per year, over 90 percent of Rwanda's population still engages in small-scale agriculture. With roughly 490 persons per square kilometer, Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa. And while it is outpacing many of its development targets, Rwanda is ranked the 18th poorest country in the world and 51 percent of families have difficulty accessing food consistently throughout the year.

Most Rwandans rely on their land as a source of food and income. Although acute malnutrition has dipped and stayed below 5 percent, 38 percent of Rwanda's children under five continue to suffer from chronic malnutrition. This means that while most young children are receiving enough calories, many are not absorbing sufficient micro- and macronutrients during a critical window of growth, the first 1,000 days.

Gardens for Health recognizes that in rural households, nutrition insecurity is caused by both a lack of essential food-related access as well as inadequate access to information. Since 2010, our organization has been conducting integrated interventions that address these interrelated issues, providing agricultural resources such as seeds, vines, trees and small livestock alongside essential nutrition, health and agricultural training. And the outcomes have been promising. Graduates of GHI's Health Center Program grow, on average, 7 different types of vegetables – a major improvement considering that at time of enrollment the average family grows just 1.4 (mirroring national averages at baseline). Consumption patterns are improving as well. Nationally, only 29% of children in Rwanda meet the standard for minimum dietary diversity, meaning that less than one third of all children consume four or more food groups each day. Among graduates of GHI's program, that number immediately rises to 62% and remains at 44% after 2-5 years. The percentage of children consuming iron and vitamin A-rich vegetables also increases by an average of 47% to 87%.

These outcomes not only help us understand the links between agriculture and nutrition in Rwanda, but also only comprise part of the bigger picture. To withstand the pressures of climate change and rapid population growth, farm land must be resilient. As soil health degrades, so does production (and therefore consumption) of nutritious food in the home. Poorly-nourished soil yields less nutritious crops, thus perpetuating a cycle of nutrition insecurity among vulnerable smallholder farmers.

Furthermore, the link between soil health and health outcomes extends beyond closing the production and consumption gap alone. Rather, we must invest in agricultural solutions that improve crop biodiversity while also promoting household dietary diversity. At Gardens for Health, we are demonstrating the potential that an integrated model - rooted in principles of conservation agriculture - can have on both crop diversity and food security.

In Rwanda, the need for sustainable food production is especially great, with 55% gradient slopes of problematic land upon which the poorest farmers depend. Gardens for Health collects data on strategies to improve soil health, increase water management efficiencies, and incorporate integrated tree-crop-livestock farming.

At the ICSD conference, GHI would be presenting our findings on which strategies are working, where we face challenges, and how we can continue to integrate agriculture and nutrition for sustainable food production and consumption in rural Rwandan households. We would also demonstrate how investing in sustainable nutrient security today equips the next generation of Rwandans to meet their full potential for generations to come, and our policy and programmatic recommendations to make this a reality.