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“Global food security and food safety:
The role of universities”

Maize Is Not the Only Food – What Can Universities Do about This?

IRMGARD JORDAN¹, THOMAS HILGER², ERNST-AUGUST NUPPENAU³

¹*Justus-Liebig University Giessen, Center for International Development and Environmental Research, Germany*

²*University of Hohenheim, Inst. of Agric. Sci. in the Tropics (Hans-Ruthenberg-Institute), Germany*

³*Justus-Liebig University Giessen, Inst. of Agric. Policy and Market Res., Germany*

Abstract

HealthyLAND is a collaborative research project, involving two German and three African universities in Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda. All universities have long-term experiences in agriculture and nutrition research. The project aimed at a better understanding how to improve the linkage between crop and dietary diversity. Besides assessing the nutritional status, crop and dietary diversity of poor farm families, agricultural and nutrition education interventions were conducted in the project areas.

During 2016, the research team (nutritionists, agricultural economists and agronomists) conducted an agriculture-nutrition-baseline study at all three African research sites. The findings confirmed that farmers' diversification levels were poor. The most common crop grown by the farmers was maize, with very little legumes and vegetables. Additionally, it was found that dietary diversity was poor. Focus group discussions revealed root causes like population density (need for starch), and perceived “food security equals maize”.

All researchers agreed that a paradigm change is needed towards improving agrobiodiversity for diverse diets, and that „the food-equals-maize-thinking“ is fostering malnutrition as well as soil degradation. However, in the HealthyLAND implementation phase curiously agricultural researchers were reluctant to design an intervention without research on maize practices. Farmer field schools were established with maize intercropping systems, including distribution of maize seeds as preference of stakeholders. It was argued that maize was used to interest farmers to participate. “Maize might be used for own consumption but also as cash crop”. This hindered the development of innovations of other crops than maize.

Discussions among the research team members showed that maize production is still highly embedded in local universities training, attitude and practice of lecturers, neglecting all the negative impacts on both human diet and soil degradation. We think the problem is also embedded in a crude and odd discussion about terms such as food security if neglecting nutrition norms. Looking for reasons is urgently needed, though normative. Policy makers and stakeholders in the agricultural sector as well as the nutrition sub-sector have a major responsibility for changing own people's perceptions and attitudes on food. It requires a paradigm change in research, university training, school education and farmer training, too.

Keywords: Agriculture nutrition linkage, food security, maize, university training