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“Filling gaps and removing traps  
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## Gendered and Age – Related Priorities for Food Tree Species to Address Food Security, Nutrition and Livelihoods: Participatory Research in Kitui County, Kenya

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### Abstract

Food trees have an important role to play in local food systems, they produce a variety of nutrient dense foods including fruits, leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds and edible oils. These foods can increase the nutritional quality of local diets, due to their micronutrients and seasonal availability. To better understand the importance and adoption of these trees in local food systems, gendered and age-related farmer preferences and priorities for species were investigated in Kitui County, Kenya. Participatory research was conducted in four villages, with 80 community representatives, 40 women and men each in eight Focus group discussions. Seasonality calendars were used for mapping of tree foods availability and pebble game was used for score -ranking preferred food trees and their functional uses. A total of 49 food trees species were listed, of which 65 % were exotics and could be used to fill food and nutrition gaps during food insecure months. In general, there was a high preference for exotic species, such as *Mangifera indica*, *Persea americana*, *Carica papaya* and *Citrus sinensis*. Knowledge on food tree species differed by gender and age, with older women listing the greatest number of species and indicating a higher preference for indigenous food trees compared to their male counterparts, citing the importance of these species for food, firewood and medicinal provisioning, however, with little market value. Older women preferred species such as *C. papaya*, *Vitex payos* and *Psidium guajava*, which are sold for income only in small quantities. In contrast, men prioritised food tree species potential economic value and other uses. Despite farmer preferences, challenges such as lack of availability of seedlings of improved varieties, prolonged droughts and scarcity of land. These constraints were gendered as well, with more younger women mentioning lack of knowledge about planting and management and socio-cultural restrictions e.g only having access to land when married; whereas younger men indicated the challenges of pests, limited markets, land scarcity and ownership. Understanding gendered and age-related priorities for food tree species, functional uses and planting in general, can support the development of preferred tree based agricultural interventions to address food security, nutrition and livelihoods

**Keywords:** Food security, food trees, gender, participatory research, priority setting