

What children eat in their earliest years shapes survival, learning and future productivity. Yet for many families, nutrition is constrained by habits, misinformation and limited choices. As Uganda confronts persistent malnutrition, there is growing recognition that change requires informed communities and stronger policies. Through a month-long campaign, *New Vision*, in partnership with UNICEF and the Ministry of Health, is spotlighting the challenges and solutions shaping children's diets and their chances of a healthy start.

By Jonan Tusingwire

It is midday in Kyentale village, Bwahurro parish, Katooke sub-county in Kyenjojo district. We arrive at the home of Semiryango Mulango, a 58-year-old father of 10, as he returns from the garden. He grows bananas, cassava, groundnuts, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, coffee, maize and fruits on seven acres.

Like many households, Mulango sells part of his produce to meet household needs and pay school fees, but he ensures a large portion remains for family consumption.

"I have never lacked food in my home. Every time we eat, there is enough food on the plate for my family," he says.

To ensure a regular supply of sauce and vegetables, behind his house, Mulango has two kitchen gardens where he grows cabbage, *dodo* and eggplants. He says the kitchen garden helps prevent diseases linked to poor diets.

On top of that, Mulango, who is also the village chairperson, says he ensures food diversity at home.

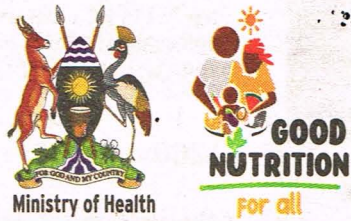
"In the morning, we take maize porridge with sweet potatoes. At lunch, we eat matooke with beans, and for supper, we may eat Irish potatoes. The menu keeps changing," he explains.

Nearby, William Mwesige, 57, grows bananas, maize, coffee and cassava. He says: "I don't even know how food is bought from the market." His wife, Alice Kyakutegekire, says they agreed to prioritise food production for their children's health. They, too, have a kitchen garden where they grow onions, eggplants and *dodo*.

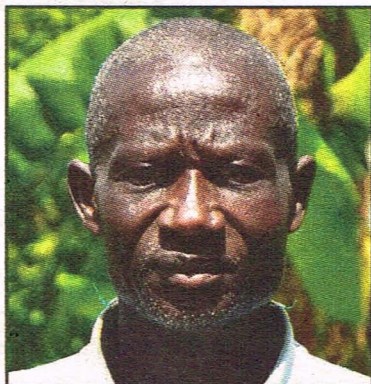
Kyakutegekire mixes vegetables with

HOW FAMILIES ARE FIGHTING **FOOD INSECURITY** IN KYENJOJO DISTRICT

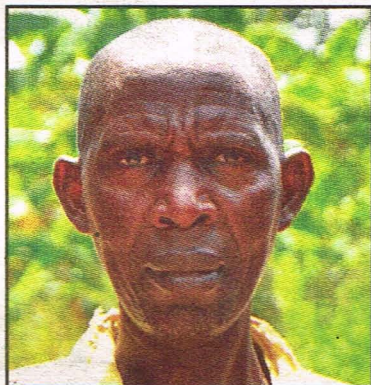
PHOTOS BY JONAN TUSINGWIRE



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH...



Farmer: William Mwesige



Resident: Semiryango Mulango

beans or ghee, saying balanced meals help children grow strong.

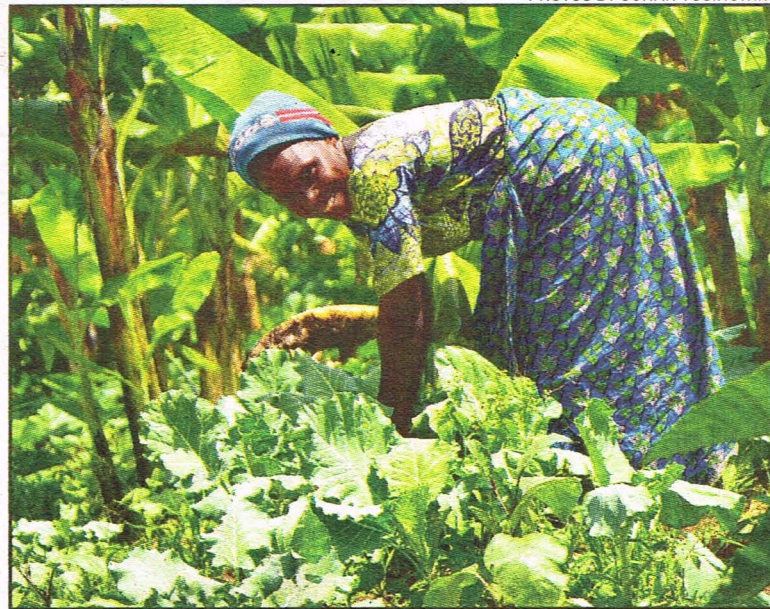
"When we have food, our children don't fall sick often. We also sell some produce to earn money," she says.

SOME HOUSEHOLDS STILL STRUGGLING

However, not all families in the district are food-secure. At 24, Miria Natukunda, is married with three children but owns only half an acre, most of it occupied by her house and kitchen. The remaining space holds a small maize patch intercropped with groundnuts.

"To have enough food, I rent land," she says.

She cannot afford to pay for large chunks of land; therefore, she grows Irish potatoes and beans on separate plots measuring 50ftx100ft each. Her husband, a charcoal burner, is often away and comes home occasionally.



Alice Kyakutegekire picking vegetables from her kitchen garden in Kyentale village, Kyenjojo district. Growing vegetables has not only encouraged balanced diets in her home, but also brings in money after sale

CASCADE PROMOTES **BETTER NUTRITION**

In 2024, the CASCADE Project, supported by CARE International Uganda, was launched in Kyenjojo to improve nutrition among women of reproductive age and children under five. Implemented by Kyenjojo Association of Women Development Actors, it strengthens community awareness through schools, local leaders and cultural institutions.

Through the intervention, nutrition demonstration gardens have been established in 15 schools, according to the executive director, Medius Nyabuthono. The gardens include vegetables and yellow maize, all promoted for their nutritional value and contribution to improved household diets.

The project uses school debates to engage learners on nutrition and gender norms. In communities, drama shows in local languages spread messages and encourage behaviour change.

"The project also works closely with district nutrition co-ordination committees to improve co-ordination and integration of nutrition interventions," Nyabuthono says.

Natukunda says life becomes difficult between harvests. Asked how she survives, Natukunda says she tills neighbours' gardens.

"Sometimes they pay me with food to cook at home, or give me sh6,000 and I buy food from the market. When crops are not ready, we do not have food at home," she explains.

MAIZE DEPENDENCE RAISES CONCERNS

Although families like Mulango's and Mwesige's grow diverse crops, many residents rely solely on maize. Mulango warns that selling maize to buy food contributes to malnutrition.

Recent health data shows that 41% of children under five in Kyenjojo are stunted, a condition caused by chronic undernutrition. Additionally, underweight births remain high, with about 50% of infants born

weighing below the healthy threshold, putting them at risk of early mortality and long-term developmental delays.

EXPANSION OF NUTRITION GARDENS

Learners have replicated school gardens at home, growing vegetables and nutrient-rich crops.

The sub-county established kitchen gardens in partnership with organisations such as Raising The Village and CARE to promote household nutrition and improve incomes among farming families, explains Tinka



Agriculture officer Tinka Kwikiriza

Kwikiriza, the Katooke sub-county agricultural officer.

"We have found that our farmers are doing well. Raising The Village and CARE supported farmers with seedlings, equipment and pesticides, which have greatly improved production," he says.

Communities, schools, cultural institutions and local leaders have reported improvements in nutrition practices, food diversity and participation in addressing malnutrition challenges.

In addition to donor-funded projects, government programmes such as the Parish Development Model (PDM) have shifted attitudes.

"Through PDM, farmers have been encouraged to move from digging for the stomach to planting for income," Kwikiriza explains.

Farmers are also being trained in financial management to save earnings for future farming.

About 85% of households in the sub-county are food secure due to increased adoption of kitchen gardening and improved farming practices. Aside from improved food security, Kwikiriza says many households have also gained an alternate source of income. Farmers are now producing enough food to feed their families and have a surplus for sale in local markets.

"These gardens are improving household nutrition and boosting incomes. Families are selling vegetables and maize to pay school fees," says Medius Nyabuthono, the Kyenjojo Association of Women Development Actors executive director.

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT

Despite progress, Nyabuthono estimates sustainability is still low owing to climate change.

Unpredictable weather and dry spells affect gardens.

In several sub-counties, extension workers are overstretched, with some officers reportedly serving more than two stations. This has limited regular follow-ups, technical guidance and support to communities implementing nutrition-related activities.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Families in Kyenjojo are fighting food insecurity through diverse farming, kitchen gardens and community projects. While households like Mulango's and Mwesige's thrive, others like Natukunda's struggle. Donor-funded and government initiatives are helping, but climate change and limited resources remain challenges.

The story of Kyenjojo shows that food security is not only about production, but also about diversity, nutrition awareness and resilience.