Reviving dead soils: A hidden treasure for healthy food in Kenya

Vihiga and Kakamega, Kenya - In the heart of Western Kenya, the traditional delicacies of the Luhya, a dominant Bantu-speaking group, were once at risk. The widespread use of toxic chemical pesticides threatened their signature dishes and indigenous vegetables. But a local initiative is turning things around, harnessing the power of bio-fertilizers and functional crop diversity to revive the land’s natural balance.

The Luhya community, with its 18 dialects and shared greeting of “mulembe” (peace be with you), primarily relies on mixed farming. Their diet predominantly includes dishes like omurere (Jute mallow), ugali (maize meal), obusuma, musonye (mashed sweet potato) and many others, which are staples in their daily diet.

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potatoes and bananas), among others. However, modern monoculture practices and the use of toxic industrial chemical inputs were degrading the soil, diminishing crop yields, and eradicating wild harvests. Local non-government organization (NGO), Bio Gardening Innovations (BIOGI), intervened with a mission: to rejuvenate the land using eco-friendly strategies. Through training sessions and practical demonstrations, they introduced the farmers to soil amendments like bokashi, a popular bio-fertilizer. Made from fermented dry animal manures, ashes, and charcoal dust, this bio-fertilizer invigorates the soil with beneficial fungi, ensuring healthy crops.

Collaborative online trainings with AFSA and the Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming (APCMNF) further equipped the farmers with new recipes like solid bio-stimulants. Made from cow dung, pulse flour, and animal urine, these organic inputs became a game-changer for the local farming community.

The results have been transformative. Gardens are once again teeming with edible mushrooms, leafy vegetables, bees, and butterflies. Old recipes, previously lost to the annals of time, are being rediscovered and shared among the generations. Moreover, with the application of bio stimulants, crop yields have doubled or even tripled on some farms.

Local farmer, Lydia, enthusiastically shares, “I want my farm to be a model learning and experimental area, so I can reach out to my neighbours with more information on diverse food systems.” Another participant, Wyclife Lumumba, admits, “I used to think only synthetic fertilizers were responsible for good produce, now I know the difference organic inputs make in revitalizing the soil and benefiting human health.”

However, challenges persist. The national emphasis on subsidized synthetic fertilizers threatens the wider adoption of these ecological alternatives. Advocacy for policy shifts is crucial to shift the narrative and promote the immense benefits of organic farming. BIOGI is actively involved in the Vihiga county agroecology policymaking platform, leveraging the results from this initiative to advocate for bio-fertilizers as a more sustainable and efficient solution for soil rejuvenation.

As the project continues, the hope is that more regions will recognize the hidden treasure in reviving dead soils and choose a path that not only benefits the environment but also ensures healthy, nutritious food for all.