



APHRC staff planting fruit trees at Comboni primary school, Korogocho, Nairobi. Photo Credit: Henry Owino

APHRC targets zero hunger with fruit trees in schools

By Henry Owino

WHILE conducting a study on household food security in informal urban settlements in 2004, researchers from African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) were shocked at the large number of children they found going to school hungry.

“The children were telling us they had not eaten for two or three days and could not comprehend class lessons. Most of them were dosing or sleeping in class while lessons were

on yet a few could not go to school at all,” recalls Elizabeth Kimani-Murage, Senior Research Scientist, Head of Maternal and Child Wellbeing Unit at APHRC.

“So, we said we cannot sit back and wait, we must do something to ensure that no woman is cooking stones for her children, or nobody is sleeping on an empty stomach for days.”

That experience inspired APHRC's Zero Hunger Initiative, which promotes the growing of fruit trees in schools and public urban spaces as a way of fighting malnutrition.

Dr. Catherine Kyobutungi, the Executive Director of APHRC, said the programme is part of the organisation's research implementation that aims to make food systems in 10 cities across six African countries more sustainable, equitable and resilient.

“We are making most out of the limited urban spaces for food production. We are free to partner with like-minded organisations to achieve Zero Hunger Initiative which is number two among the 17 SDGs,” Dr. Kyobutungi said.



Dr Catherine Kyobutungi, APHRC Director having a chat with Esther Passaris, Nairobi Woman Representative. Photo Credit: Henry Owino

The first 50 fruit trees were planted at Daniel Comboni Primary School in Nairobi's Korogocho slums. Most of the fruit trees planted were grafted mango trees. Grafted mangoes take a shorter time to mature -- three to five years to produce its first fruits.

Mangoes are also an excellent source of potassium, folate, fibre, and vitamins A, C, B6, E, and K and are rich in numerous plant polyphenols that have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

But mangoes and other fruits are expensive and most parents in informal urban settlements cannot afford them.

Under Zero Hunger Initiative, parents are encouraged to plant fruit trees in their local schools and public spaces to support nutrition programmes in the learning institutions.

In Nairobi, the Zero initiative targets public urban schools, especially those in informal settlements where malnutrition prevalence is high.

Dr Kyobutungi said the plan is to roll out to other parts of the country

once all public primary schools are covered and public spaces in Nairobi exhausted.

"Each grafted fruit tree planted in the schools will provide between

300 and 500 organic fruits that will support school feeding and nutrition programmes. The fruit trees will also make the schools green," Dr Kyobutungi said.

The programme is emphasising the message that when you grow fruit trees today for healthier food, you secure tomorrow by ensuring a sustainable environment for future generations as well.

The programme has won praise from the city's political leadership, with Nairobi Woman Representative Esther Passaris highlighting its contribution to efforts to guarantee the constitutional right to safe and quality food.

"Most of the leafy greens eaten in Nairobi are grown near rivers whose waters are polluted with sewer lines and other effluent affects vegetables and could cause diseases to consumers," Ms Passaris said.



Dr. Kimani-Murage planting a mango tree at Comboni primary school, Korogocho, Nairobi. Photo Credit: Henry Owino.