

KENYA: Empowering Voices – Vihiga’s Journey towards the Right to Food

The transformation of food systems only works if all stakeholders are involved. But what happens if local citizens, especially those from vulnerable groups, are not included? In Kenya, an entire region has set out to improve rural governance. The successes in Vihiga County are immediate.



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Hunger Meets Lack of Political Participation

Powerlessness makes you frustrated. And you can't eat it either: That's how Naomi Amwayi felt for years. "I had already resigned myself to it," says the mother of six from Vihiga, a county in western Kenya, about support money promised by the state that never materialized. "In 2014, I registered with the public Cash Transfer Program because I am physically disabled," she recalls. But there was simply no response to her claim for 2,000 shillings (around 14 euros) a month. The state was like a black box for Naomi Amwayi. "I was like many disabled people, old people and orphans: We were entitled, but nothing happened." Many people stopped going to the barazas, the local public meetings of the chiefs, a long time ago; nothing of importance was discussed there anyway.

Yet the region needs good rural governance: People are struggling with population pressure, shrinking land sizes, poverty, inflation and high food prices. As a result, 30 percent of the population in Kenya is undernourished and a quarter of all children in Vihiga under the age of five have stunted growth.

Strengthening Rural Governance for the Right to Adequate Food

What is needed is a governance framework that safeguards against human rights violations and implements existing legal frameworks - a governance in which local citizens have a say in the planning processes that affect their livelihoods, state officials are transparent and accountable to citizens about their decision-making processes, and food policies no longer operate in isolation from each other. Welthungerhilfe started a cooperation with the Kenyan organizations Rural Outreach Africa (ROA) and The Institute for Social Accountability (TISA). "We went into the communities to understand the issues that affect their access to food," says Program Manager Mary Njeri Karanu, recalling the beginnings of the project in 2020. "And in a second step, we informed people about their rights and explained who they should turn to." In workshops, local administrations were also sensitized to the concerns of the citizens.

In a third step, various civil society organizations from five counties around Lake Victoria joined forces and founded the Lake Region Food Systems Network, which drafted a manifesto for policymakers and works to ensure that priorities of vulnerable groups are reflected in county development plans. The initiative follows a multi-level approach: Obstacles to realizing the Right to Food are identified at the local level. This evidence is used to advocate for change at the regional

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and national level. In addition, the experiences and policy demands are incorporated into debates at supra-national levels such as the United Nations Food Systems Summit or the climate conferences.

Progress at Grassroots Level to be Backed up by National Action

Not only is Naomi Amwayi now receiving government support, but she has also founded a group of people living with disabilities who are asserting their claims. The group was empowered to participate in a community scorecard exercise to assess government services

including the Cash Transfer Program. Later they held an interface meeting with government officials and service providers to present their recommendations to improve service delivery for disabled people. Three counties from the network have reformed their development planning process to focus on the participation of representatives from each village. The resulting plan now includes priorities that have been put forward by citizens: These range from the establishment of a grievance mechanism to climate change adaptation strategies and the expansion of social security systems. The duty bearers are open to strengthening participation and the rule of law. And the barazas in Vihiga County are once again well attended. “Change starts from the grassroots”, says Sheila Lyona, program officer at TISA. “But new action is also needed at national level. It’s an approach from both ends. That’s why we formed a national Right to Food Coalition of 50 organizations – with the Lake Region Food System Network at the county level as a link.”

Lessons learned

- **Progress on political participation and the rule of law can be achieved** when communities are empowered to raise their demands and claim access to public services and state officials are sensitized and held to account on their obligations.
- **Setting up grievance redressal mechanisms for public services** and making them accessible for vulnerable groups is elementary to advancing the Right to Food.
- **Good media work and close relationships with journalists made injustices in land rights public.** This helped push the reform forward.
- **Linking rights holders at the local level with civil society actors at the subnational and national level** is important to ensure that advocacy is realized at the level where change needs to happen.



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**Mary Njeri Karanu,
Program Manager at Rural Outreach Africa:**

It is people’s responsibility to hold duty bearers accountable for the Right to Food. Advocacy is a marathon, it needs a lot of persistence. This succeeds when civil society organizations are not elite groups, but inclusive and representative of the most affected groups.

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