

# University's Community Outreach

The University of Nairobi has always strived to translate its research programmes and findings into basic community development components. This is epitomized by the numerous community outreach projects which the university has been involved in over the years. The latest of these is the Nutribusiness Project which was handed over to women groups and Co-operative in Ndanai, Bomet and Gatanga, Murang'a Districts respectively.

The Nutribusiness projects is the fruits of a linkage and co-operations between the Penn State University, Tuskegee University both of the U.S.A. and the University of Nairobi in pursuit of academic co-operation and international understanding. The funding was by USAID, the United States Ambassador in Kenya Self-Help Fund and the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH).

Since October 1992 the University of Nairobi, in cooperation with the Penn. State University and Tuskegee University, has been involved with approximately 2,500 smallholder women farmers who are members of organized women's groups in Murang'a and Bomet Districts in an effort to increase the commercialization of the women's agricultural products. The aim of the project was to create an opportunity for the women to process some proportion of their commodities into supplemental weaning mixtures for older infants and young children which would be marketed in district centers and other peri-urban areas.

There were 88 women's groups associated with the Nutribusiness Projects which are independently involved in micro enterprises ranging from kiosks, carpentry shops and hotels to wine production, bee keeping, and poultry raising. These micro enterprises create local employment opportunities for both women and men. In Bomet and Murang'a, many of the women involved in the Nutribusiness Project are illiterate, and needy widows or unmarried mothers with young

children who do not have sufficient land available to adequately feed their families or to pay their children's school fees.

The Nutribusiness Project is concerned with promoting local agricultural and food processing technologies that are environmentally friendly. The women chose to use in their weaning food formulas, ingredients that are able to grow successfully without the use of pesticides. The system employed for drying the bananas, vegetables and cooked beans rely largely, if not exclusively on solar energy. In addition, high energy-efficient jikos to heat the water for blanching and soaking the ingredients prior to drying, have been built.

The Nutribusiness Cooperatives will be producing and marketing culturally-appropriate local food products that have the potential to protect human health by improving child survival. Weaning-age children (particularly those between 9 to 24 months of age) are the most nutritionally vulnerable group in the population. The complications of weaning are increased when these children are parented by women who have migrated to the peri-urban areas in search of employment. The circumstances under which these women live often require them to resort to early weaning with nutritionally inadequate gruels. Under such conditions, they are not likely to supplement their young child's diet with vegetables, fruits and other food necessary to provide adequate amounts of calories, protein and the micro nutrients essential for health. For this reason, efforts to provide convenient, affordable supplemental weaning mixtures is implicitly linked to child survival.

Women who grow crops to be used in the supplemental weaning foods will be able to sell their crops to the Nutribusiness Cooperatives. Each Cooperative has a solar dryer, a machine to de-hull maize, a posho mill and a pick-up truck. The

individual foods will be dried, milled and mixed into a single, nutritious, easy-to-cook weaning food for young children. The food will be put into 1 Kg and 500 gram packages to be sold. The cooperative will sell the weaning food and profits will be distributed to individual cooperative members on the basis of the shares they hold in the Nutribusiness Cooperative.

University staff and students tested the weaning foods to be sure they contain enough vitamins, minerals and protein to be healthful foods for young children. They designed the equipment that is needed to process the products. This was done in collaboration with the Kenya Industrial Research and Development Institute KIRDI.

The Nutribusiness Project also relates to the goal of building democracy by involving women from politically opposed tribal groups in a common activity. The Nutribusiness Project was launched during a period of tribal unrest (late 1992) with memorable exchange visits between women from Bomet and Murang'a. These visits established a bond of friendship and mutual respect between women whose common focus is the development of their communities and the health of their children, on non-tribal or party politics. Subsequently, the women have learnt many lessons about participation in a democratic society by electing their peers to positions of authority on sub-location Nutribusiness Councils. The Council officers, in turn, have elected the office bearers to their District's Nutribusiness Cooperative Board of Directors. These Directors will establish the policies that will be binding upon the members of all the participating women's groups. The concept of joint ownership of property and management of resources by women from different locations has taken time and effort to develop, but this is the sort of grassroot-level involvement that women need to be able to internalise the goals of a civil society based on democratic principles.