1. Traditional foods

Most cultures believe that food and health are linked and foods are often related to cultural identity. In the past, societies ate and prepared food based on crops, meats, and resources that were available in local areas. However, with technology and access to new, different, and more Westernized foods, many food-related traditions have changed.

Several CHAPS projects explored past traditions and practices in an effort to improve health, access to food, and food safety. The following stories show some examples in which communities examined traditions around food. By reviving traditional practices and modifying current practices in partnership with community members, CHAPS grantees helped bring a greater awareness of health issues to their peers and stimulated public debate about the links between culture and health. Because CHAPS grantees learned from the experiences and wisdom of older generations and taught and involved younger generations, they successfully combined old traditions and new practices. As one CHAPS participant suggested, "We should pick up what is good from the past and blend it with what is good now."

Dry foods in the Sinai

In the past, farmers in the hot and dry southern Sinai region of Egypt would dry foods after the harvest each summer in preparation for the winter season. Although time consuming, this practice provided local communities with accessible and affordable foods. After a foreign occupation of the area and with the passing of time, however, local supermarkets began to sell dried and canned foods and the centuries-old tradition of drying foods slowly disappeared.

Mahmoud Mansour, a resident of one of the Bedouin villages of southern Sinai, realized that the nutrition of his community members was suffering because they were unable to afford the more expensive dried foods sold in supermarkets. Because the tradition of preserving foods was no longer in practice, those who could not afford these foods simply went without them. Mahmoud learned how to dry foods as a child from his father and realized that reviving this tradition could help his fellow community members.

According to Mahmoud, drying foods "stopped because the supermarkets took up the role of selling the dried food to them (the community). Since not everybody can afford to buy the food from the supermarket, I decided to start this project to cater for such people. Also, the dried food we make is much healthier than that of the supermarket because it does not have any preservatives."

After receiving a CHAPS grant, Mahmoud began to experiment with different drying techniques. He learned from the experiences and wisdom of his father and other older villagers. By collecting information from older villagers, he learned how to dry food in a way that kept their flavor and kept them from spoiling. He constructed a greenhouse for drying food and began to dry fruits, vegetables, medicinal plants, and other foods.

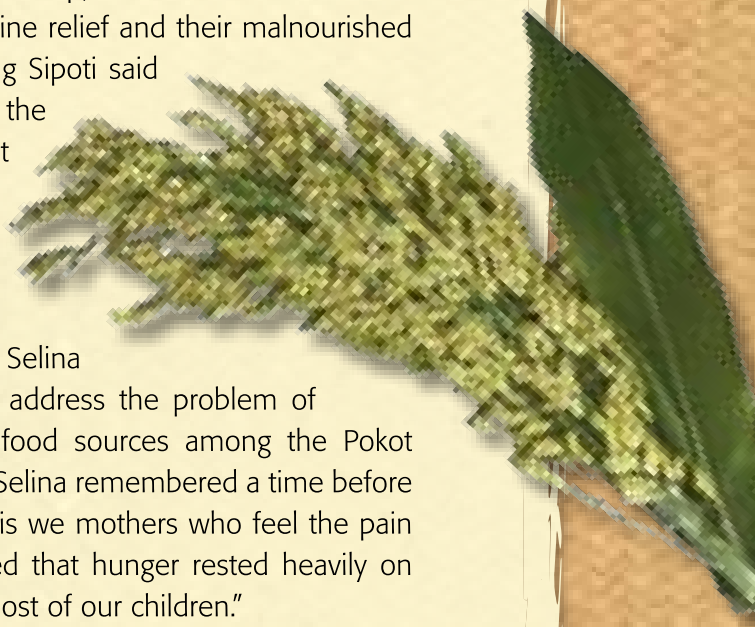
A drying area was constructed with drying racks and other equipment required for the drying process. Five women and three men managed the drying area and the whole community provided food to be preserved. As community members brought foods to Mahmoud, he taught them how to dry foods properly so they would be able to do it without him. "I will teach them myself," said Mahmoud. "They are my own people and I will not live forever. I am doing it not for myself alone, but for my community."

Because Mahmoud does not grow enough to provide food for everyone in his community, he dries foods that are brought to him by others. This created a challenge—because the Sinai area is so large, people from farther away were not able to carry food and walk such long distances. Because of this, Mahmoud used his own funds to build two additional greenhouses in different areas so people further away would not have to walk as far.

Today, Mahmoud's project provides dried food for the community and also earns an income from the sale of dried food to neighboring villages. Local water sources are no longer being contaminated by the practice of throwing spoiled vegetables into the wells, because they are now being dried before they can spoil. Now everything that can be dried is preserved for future consumption: tomatoes, apples, berries, peaches, apricots, pears, and local vegetables and herbs are all dried by villagers. Nearby communities have been inspired by Mahmoud's example and have constructed their own greenhouses to dry their own food. Mahmoud's leadership has brought greater food security to the people of southern Sinai and the lessons he has taught them about reviving the traditional practice of drying foods are sure to aid future generations.

Indigenous foods in arid Pokot

In an arid section of Kenya known as Pokot, families also struggle to find healthy food sources. Like the people of southern Sinai, the Pokot are often too far from local markets and are not able to afford the exotic and foreign foods sold in these shops. Before the work of the Tomwo Women's Group, the families of Pokot were becoming more and more dependent on famine relief and their malnourished children were frequently ill. Selina Chemunung Sipoti said that frequent droughts drastically affected the health of families in the community: "Drought times are the hardest times in our lives. We have to beg for food from relief agencies, which is never enough."



Along with 17 other mothers of various ages, Selina helped form the Tomwo Women's Group to address the problem of malnutrition and improve the availability of food sources among the Pokot communities. Now the group's vice chairman, Selina remembered a time before the group formed: "Anytime hunger strikes, it is we mothers who feel the pain of sleeping with a hungry child.... We realized that hunger rested heavily on women's shoulders and that it was affecting most of our children."

In the beginning, the Tomwo women tried to fight poverty in their communities. They began by sewing beaded ornaments and gourds for sale to raise money. However, because many people made these traditional items themselves and did not have the money to buy them from the group, the activity did not make enough income and was not sustainable.

Seeing that their children remained undernourished and sick, the Tomwo women started to look more carefully

at their local food sources. The Pokot had become used to famine relief handouts and had lost the skills of searching for edible plants and of growing indigenous crops. The introduction of exotic crops such as maize, beans, and cabbages, which are not suited to the Pokot environment, meant that many communities stopped farming and turned to begging for food. The mothers realized that by relying on locally available foods, as their ancestors had done, they might be able to solve the problem of malnutrition among their children. Selina said, "We believed that the only sustainable choice was for us to start planting indigenous crops and learning about what was edible in our environment."

Just like Mahmoud Mansour in Egypt, the Tomwo women turned to their elders for help. Older generations remembered a time when the Pokot planted local crops that could be harvested and stored during droughts. Topong Chepotinta, a 70-year-old member of the community, remembered that in the past, "the issue of hunger was as distant as a mirage." She said that, with the passing of time, people from her community gradually stopped using indigenous crops and began using exotic ones.

Topong Chepotinta and other elders reminded the Tomwo women of the abundance of wild fruits and greens growing in the local area, many of which had been abandoned during colonial times. From the elders, the Tomwo Women's Group learned which wild foods they could eat and then began selecting these to feed their children. The Tomwo women invited the older women to teach the younger women how to identify edible plants, grow or gather them, and prepare them into delicious porridges. As the women began to see the health of their children improve, they realized that they could share their lessons with nearby communities that also suffered from poverty and poor nutrition.

As with Mahmoud Mansour, a CHAPS grant helped the Tomwo women bring their message to a larger audience. The women used traditional songs, dances, and crafts to carry messages about nutrition and teach other communities about local plants. Other communities listened to their messages and gradually began to rely on local plants as well. Within a short while, children in these communities began to look healthier—a change that even drew the attention of the local health center.

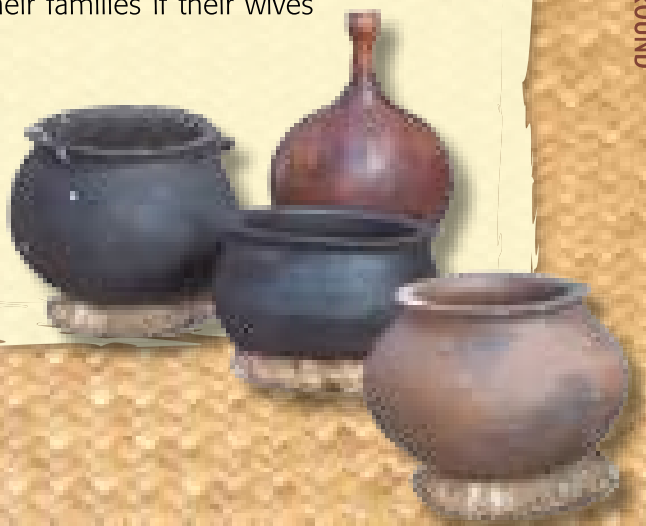
Seclusion of new mothers in Taveta

Just as in Pokot and southern Sinai, community members in the Taveta community in Kenya began to notice that their families, and particularly new mothers, were not as healthy as in the past, had poorer nutrition, and suffered from illness more often. The combination of a lack of understanding about the nutritional value of locally-available foods; the belief that refined, more modern foods were healthier; and the disappearance of the traditional practice of Kushumia mvee was leading to poor health and nutrition among community members.

The Kushumia Mvee Project among the Taveta community in Kenya involved the whole community in improving the health of new mothers by bringing back Kushumia mvee, a practice in which new mothers are allowed to rest and be cared for after giving birth. Fed traditional meals that are high in nutrition, the new mother and her child are given time to bond while the mother is cared for so that she can recover from childbirth and regain her strength.

In addition to promoting Kushumia mvee, project leaders wanted to challenge the idea that refined and modern foods are superior to traditional foods. Recognizing that new mothers were at risk for having poor nutrition, they decided to focus on bringing back the practice of Kushumia mvee and to use it as a way to educate the community about nutrition, healthy birthing, and infant care. They also wished to encourage men to support their wives by taking on the expenses related to the period of rest and to help the men recognize that it was good for their families if their wives were strong and well-nourished.

Once again, community elders played a significant role in re-educating their communities. The Taveta Mothers' Group began by collecting stories and experiences from the older



members of their community about this practice in order to find out more about what actually happened in the past. Because they found more than one version of the practice in their community, they then asked community members which parts of Kushumia mvee were most helpful for new mothers. Together, the community and the mothers' group decided to focus on traditional foods and the rest period for new mothers, bringing back what they considered to be the most important parts of the Kushumia mvee practice.

To do this, the Taveta Mothers' Group designed posters and stickers with the help of local artists. They held choir recitals in which songs were sung about Kushumia mvee and made a videotape of the launch of the Kushumia mvee project. The women and artists worked hard to make materials that would use colors, photographs, and language acceptable to elders and young people alike. They worked hard to reach out to men so that they, too, would support the project and their wives.

Dr. Clara Momanyi, an advisor to the project, said, "The Kushumia mvee project will help future generations in taking care of their pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. Taveta has many foods and we should learn to use them all."

Today, thanks to this project, more new mothers in Taveta are given time to rest and are fed nutritious, traditional foods during the period after they give birth. The Taveta Mothers' Group is proud that this has been the result of bringing back what is good from their own culture, not using an outside approach. Just as in the CHAPS projects from Pokot and southern Sinai, the use of a traditional practice is improving the health of this community.

Sugar dolls in Egypt

In another area of Egypt, the Mulad sugar doll is an important part of religious celebrations for the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. The making of these dolls has been a part of the celebrations in Egypt for a long time, but current ways of producing and packaging the dolls had made them unsafe.

Mulad sugar dolls are made by boiling sugar water, adding citric acid and food coloring, and pouring the mixture into moulds. This project was designed by a team of researchers headed by Dr. El Hofi, a nutrition expert. Dr. El Hofi said, "From our experience, we knew where the contamination came from. So we taught the people making the dolls a (safe) way to store the raw material and methods of stopping bacteria growth and of cleaning their work areas." Unlike in the other stories you have read so far, this CHAPS project did not bring back a tradition that had fallen out of favor, but instead worked to make an existing cultural practice safer and healthier.

In addition to the contamination, Dr. El Hofi's team noticed that sugar dolls used artificial colors instead of natural food colors, which were used in the past. Natural food colors were easier for doll makers to find and less expensive to use, but doll makers believed that artificial colors were more modern and they had grown popular in recent time.

Dr. El Hofi's team set out to show Mulad doll makers better ways to store the sugar, produce the moulds, and prepare the dolls so that they were safe. They also led a campaign to replace the popular artificial coloring by bringing back the traditional practice of using natural food colors to decorate the dolls. "It is an innovative project that has transformed the traditional industry into a modern one," said Dr. El Hofi. "The manufacturers have even been able to produce to a level where they distribute their products to the supermarkets. This project was important because it helped us protect consumers and also revive a traditional industry and make it better and safer."

Reflection questions

Now that you have read the stories behind some CHAPS projects dealing with traditional foods, think about how they are similar to situations within your own community. It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Identify healthy, traditional food or foods in your culture that are slowly being forgotten or replaced by less healthy foods. How do you think we can bring back healthy eating habits?
- In what way have members of your community combined traditional foods or food preparation techniques with modern foods or food preparation techniques?
- In what way has modern technology helped or improved a tradition in your culture? In what ways has it harmed it?