

‘True Sri Lankan Taste’ food outlets: Promoting indigenous foods for healthier diets



(left to right) **Disna Rathnasinghe** is Additional Director in Agribusiness Development in the Department of Agriculture, Sri Lanka.

Gamini Samarasinghe is Additional Director of the Plant Genetic Resources Centre, Sri Lanka and National Coordinator of the Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition project.

Renuka Silva is Professor of Nutrition and Chair of the Department of Applied Nutrition, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka.

Danny Hunter is Global Coordinator of the Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition Project and a senior scientist in the Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems initiative.

Introduction

Sri Lanka, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, is home to a huge diversity of edible species, including wild plants, local animal breeds, food crops and traditional nutrient-rich varieties of fruit and vegetables. Sri Lankan farmers have maintained this rich agro-biodiversity in their fields for thousands of years. Today, urbanisation and generational changes in food preferences and lifestyles have led to changes in food production, eating habits and the food system.

Although the health and living standards of Sri Lankans have improved in recent years, malnutrition continues to be a serious problem. There have been moderate declines in the prevalence of undernourishment (from 13.8% in 2010 to 10.9% in 2018) and child stunting (from 19.2% in 2010 to 17.3% in 2018), but child wasting has increased to an alarming rate of 15.1% over the same period¹. Moreover, more than half of Sri Lankan children and adolescents are affected by multiple micronutrient deficiencies, including low levels of vitamin A and iron². At the same time, diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity and cancer are on the rise in Sri Lanka: one in three people have raised blood pressure and a third of women are overweight³. Consumption of salt is two to three times higher than recommended and the consumption of fruits, vegetables and milk products is low².

An untapped resource

Nutrient-rich indigenous species remain a largely untapped resource for long-term food security in the country. Including agro-biodiversity in food systems and diets can help solve national diet-related nutrition and health issues by providing ready access to the diversity of nutrients needed for healthy growth and living, yet there are many barriers and constraints to the production and consumption of indigenous foods. Currently, locally available traditional fruits and vegetables are considered 'inferior'; often due to a lack of awareness and because they do not meet aesthetic standards that consumers have come to expect. More technical, political and financial support, as well as incentives and public



The canteens provide women with an opportunity to run their own business

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¹ globalnutritionreport.org/nutrition-profiles/asia/southern-asia/sri-lanka/

² Weerahewa J, Gedara P, Wijetunga C. Nutrition Transition in Sri Lanka: A Diagnosis. *Ann. Nutr. Food Sci.* 2018;2:1020

³ www.who.int/beat-ncds/countries/sri-lanka/en/



Hela Bojun are working to make healthy and nutritious foods available, based on recipes once common in Sri Lankan culture

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awareness, are clearly needed if farmers are to conserve and grow these foods and if consumers are to find them desirable and create demand for them.

Healthy food outlets run by women

One innovative approach to addressing these multiple challenges has been the design and implementation of a network of Hela Bojun 'True Sri Lankan Taste' food outlets throughout the country. These outlets are operated by about 750 women trained by the Women's Agriculture Extension Programme in the Department of Agriculture in food preparation, food hygiene, customer care and business management. Currently there are 22 outlets established primarily in urban areas, including university campuses and near government offices.

There were a number of reasons for initiating a network of Hela Bojun, including:

- to generate agriculture-based entrepreneurship, employment and private enterprise opportunities, especially for women, in order to provide a sustainable and stable family income;
- to create awareness and interest among new generations about healthy eating and the nutritional value of disappearing traditional foods and recipes, while trying to reduce the influence of the growing fast-food culture;
- to reduce reliance on foreign food imports, while creating demand for local produce.

Addressing rising obesity levels

This is the first national local food-outlet network of its kind to actively promote indigenous foods for healthy eating as well as livelihoods of rural women and farmers. Hela Bojun have proven popular among customers, with enthusiasm and demand for local traditional foods. There is also growing awareness among the population at large about the impact of poor diet on general health and increasing levels of overweight/obesity and NCDs and the potential of nutrient-rich traditional foods as part of the solution to addressing this.

Efforts to enhance awareness and presentation of local, healthy traditional foods are continuing, including additional capacity-building of outlet vendors. The food outlets have been selling local foods at competitive and affordable prices, helping make traditional foods more available to the general population. Some women have been empowered to earn a decent living wage (600-800 USD/month).

Making snacks healthier

Through the Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition project⁴, which has been supporting the expansion of the Hela Bojun network, a multi-sector platform has been established in Sri Lanka that links many relevant ministries (including health), universities, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, chefs, dietitians and nutritionists. This has had many benefits, including partnering with a university research network that has provided data on the nutritional composition of local foods sold in outlets, and there are plans to display nutrition information labelling in the future. Other initiatives include chefs working with the women's groups to build capacity in quality, presentation and handling of food.

An assessment of the nutritional value of foods on sale found that some traditional breakfast meals and snacks could not be categorised as 'healthy'. To address this, various partners are working with Hela Bojun organisers to identify more nutritious and healthy alternatives and recipes once common in Sri Lankan food culture, especially traditional cereal products (millet), under-utilised seasonal fruits, vegetables and a variety of green leafy vegetables in efforts to make these more widely available. The initiative also includes healthier food preparation and recipes that are at the same time visually appealing to consumers.

Future campaigns

In addition, new efforts are focusing on targeted, innovative, healthy food promotion campaigns, communication strategies using social media and mass media, and for the Department of Agriculture to collaborate on these with the private sector and universities. Promoting healthy foods, especially traditional cereals, pulses, fruits and vegetables, may not only strengthen the health promotion aspect of the initiative but at the same time could better link Hela Bojun outlets to schools, home gardens, urban gardens, workplaces and small-scale farms. Some of these campaigns are currently underway and include discussions with the Ministry of Education to convert school canteens into Hela Bojun.

⁴ The Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition project was a multi-country project in Brazil, Kenya, Turkey and Sri Lanka funded by the Global Environment Facility, the funding mechanism for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. www.b4fn.org/countries