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Children receive lessons on nutrition and the environment

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In Mukono District, about an hour outside of Kampala, Uganda, agriculture used to be considered a "punishment" for young people at school if they didn't behave and something they would be forced to do if they couldn't go to university or find jobs in the city, according to Edward Mukiibi and Roger Serunjogi, coordinators of the Developing Innovations in School Cultivation (DISC) project. Mukiibi, 23, and Serunjogi, 22, started the project in 2006 as a way to improve nutrition, environmental awareness, and food traditions and culture in Mukono by establishing school gardens at 15 preschool, day and boarding schools. And over the last year, DISC has received global attention for its work - DISC is now partly funded by Slow Food International.

They started with Sunrise School, a preschool taking care of children between the ages of 3 and 6. By teaching these kids early about growing, preparing and eating food, they hope to cultivate the next generation of farmers and eaters who can preserve Uganda's culinary traditions. In addition to teaching the children about planting indigenous and traditional vegetables and fruit trees, DISC puts a big emphasis on food preparation and processing. "If a person doesn't know how to cook or prepare food, they don't know how to eat," said Mukiibi. The kids at Sunrise - and the other schools working with DISC - know how to grow, how to prepare and how to eat food, as well as its nutritional content.

As a result, these students grow up with more respect - and excitement - about farming. At Sirapollo Kaggwass Secondary School, we met 19-year-old Mary Naku, who is learning farming skills from DISC. This was her school's first year with the project and Naku has gained leadership and farming skills. "As youth we have learned to grow fruits and vegetables," she says, "to support our lives."

Betty Nabukalu, a 16-year-old student at Kisoga Secondary School, manages her school's garden and explained how DISC has taught the students "new" methods of planting vegetables. Before, she says, "we used to just plant seeds," but now she and the other students know how to fertilize with manure and compost. And, she says, they've learned not only that they can produce food, but also earn money from it. DISC is also helping build leadership skills.

By focusing on school gardens, Mukiibi and Serunjogi are helping not only to feed children, but are also revitalizing an interest in - and cultivation of - African indigenous vegetables. The schools don't use any hybrid seeds, but rely on what is locally available. Students and teachers at

DISC project schools are taught how to save seed from local varieties of amaranth, sumiwiki, maize, African eggplant, and other local crops to grow in school gardens. They learn how to both dry the seeds and how to store them for the next season. With support from Slow Food International, DISC is establishing a seed bank to, according to Mukiibi, "preserve the world's best vegetables."

At both day and boarding schools, students work with school chefs to learn how to cook foods - giving them the opportunity to understand food production literally from farm to table. And unlike most other schools in Uganda, DISC project schools get local fruits with their breakfast and can harvest their own desert at lunchtime.

Serunjogi explained that in addition to the monkeys who live around Sunrise School and who like to eat some of the crops from their garden, the biggest challenges for DISC involve transportation and equipment for the schools. Because DISC doesn't have its own vehicle, the coordinators, who need to evaluate gardens and make sure that the children are actually getting the food they help grow, often have to scramble to find transportation.

But as the project receives more interest - from teachers, students, parents, and policymakers and more funding, they're likely to overcome these challenges and make farming a more viable option for youth in Mikuni and other parts of Uganda. Thanks to DISC, students no longer see agriculture as an option of last resort, but rather as a way to make money, help their communities and preserve biodiversity.