

Kenya Policy Brief

Improving decision making through food composition data

The Kenyan food composition tables: an essential tool for policy makers, health practitioners, researchers, industry and agricultural sector



Background

Food composition databases are detailed sets of information giving values of nutritionally important components of foods including protein, carbohydrates, fat, vitamins and minerals. It also includes other bioactive compounds and anti-nutritional factors.

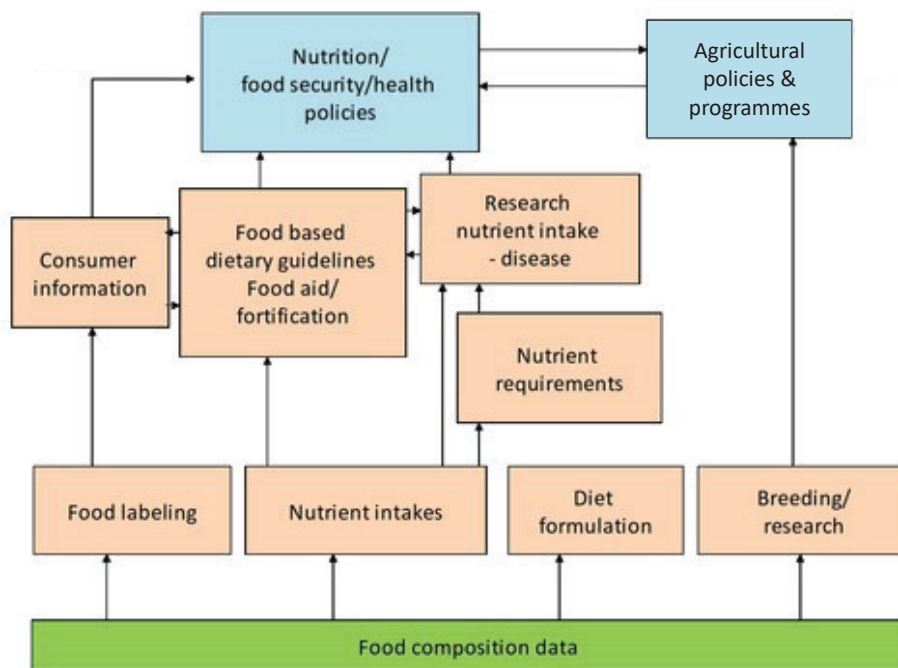
Food Composition Tables (FCTs) are an important tool that can be applied in many fields. These include epidemiological research, nutrition and clinical practice, nutrition and health policy making, public health and education, agricultural food production and breeding, and the food manufacturing and leverage industry.

FCTs play a key role in the progress towards achieving food and nutrition security as they guide programmes targeting nutritious diets for healthy populations. FCTs are routinely used in food consumption surveys and other programmes assessing the diets consumed by different populations. Similarly, FCTs remain a key tool in clinical practice for formulating and planning of diets and the management of different health conditions. McCance and Widdowson (1940) stated that 'Knowledge of the chemical composition of foods is the first essential in the dietary treatment of disease or in any quantitative study of human nutrition'. This emphasizes the link between food, nutrition, health

and disease and the need to establish the nutrient components in our foods.

To address the changing trends in agricultural production and food systems, diets, food habits and lifestyles as well as population health, there is need to constantly review FCTs, as an essential tool in driving sound nutrition and health agendas. The first Kenyan Food composition tables were developed in 1993 (Sehmi, 1993). The KFCT 2018 has been revised with the support of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MoH); Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Irrigation (MoALF&I); Kenya Agriculture and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO), and other partners.

A reliable, comprehensive, updated and user friendly food composition database is a necessity for researchers, nutritionists and health care systems, agricultural food systems and industry.



Source: U. Ruth Charrondiere. FAO, INFOODS

Embracing the use of the revised FCT Kenya and policy implications

Epidemiologists and research institutions working in food, nutrition and health related research are the main users of food composition databases. Nutritionists and health practitioners rely on the FCTs to facilitate health education and advocacy. Food formulation and labeling, and industrial as well as agricultural food production for healthy populations, should also be guided by accurate and reliable information on food composition (figure above).

The shift to food-based nutrition interventions is also a driving force for FCT work as it relies on the nutrient composition of locally consumed foods. With the growing burden of non-communicable diseases, the

food and beverage industry would rely heavily on food composition data, especially data on cooked recipes, in order to provide reliable and accurate information about nutrient content of the commonly consumed foods to inform healthy diets.

With the changing trends on agricultural food systems, food consumption, recipes and food preferences, human lifestyle and health information systems in Kenya, continuous updating of FCT remains critical as it is directly linked towards achieving the Vision 2030, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and Kenyan Food and Nutrition Security Policy (GoK, 2011) as well as agricultural policies.



Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed in order to enhance food composition work:

1. There is need to set up a national food composition program and food composition database within the Ministry of Health, so as to ensure continued co-ordination, collection and submissions of food analysis data, thus making future updating of FCTs an easier and sustainable process.

Capacity building and research

2. In order to build local capacity in food analysis the Food Composition Course needs to be integrated into Nutrition and Food Science University curriculum.

3. To strengthen linkage between research and development, there is need to support research organizations and universities to undertake food analysis research, link the analysis to national priorities, and support in dissemination of such research data especially. Furthermore, this data should be presented in a user-friendly way.

4. The government should equip and maintain one national reference laboratory that can be used for food analysis, so as to reduce food analysis costs and ensure quality analytical data.

5. Nutritionists need to possess a minimum amount of knowledge on FCTs and food analysis so as to be in a position to guide the analysis process in different laboratories – this will ensure that the quality of results received.

6. Food composition data compilation capacity should be developed, e.g. a new FAO/INFOODS Guideline on Compilation of Food Composition Data would be an asset.

7. Mentoring and data checking from more experienced food composition experts are key in

all steps of the process, to avoid errors and thus low quality published FCTs.

8. The FAO/INFOODS e-Learning Course on Food Composition Data is user-friendly with practical exercises for the different sections with an option for learners to repeat attempts when they give incorrect answers. Institutions that incorporate the course in the curriculum should include practical lessons to be done alongside the course.

Advocacy

9. Need for high level advocacy on the need and use of food composition data at national and county level with policy makers, programmers, research institutions and food industries, among others.

10. Consider working on analysis and policy advocacy for foods that are nutritious but under-utilized. This information can be collected through a food consumption survey. A food consumption survey could also identify priority foods for analysis for future updates to the FCTs.

Private sector involvement

11. There are opportunities to work better with food industries so as to have processed food data increasingly included in food composition tables. However, one should ensure proper management of conflict of interest.

Dissemination and enhancing use

12. It is important for projects to plan adequate budgets for dissemination and assistance to stakeholders on how to use the Food Composition Tables. It is one thing to produce a book, but another for the contents of the book to be used to improve decision making at all levels.



Conclusion

Based on the Food Composition review process that Kenya has followed, the following conclusions can be made:

1. The role of government in leading and their commitment to such critical processes is crucial for a successful outcome.
2. Bringing together stakeholders from agriculture, health, education and other sectors is a good way of ensuring that food analysis and research for improved agricultural and health programming is facilitated and owned up.
3. Preparation of the Kenya Food Composition Tables and a recipe book concurrently, is a recommended approach in strengthening research (food analysis) and practice (food utilisation through recipes).
4. The private sector (in this case – laboratories for food analysis) has an important role in building capacities of other stakeholders at national and sub national levels.
5. Flexibility by all stakeholders and adapting to the local context played a big role in the success of the Kenya process.



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