
Abstract

Bananas and plantains serve as important food crops in much of Africa. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), production of bananas is concentrated in the eastern region and ranges between 75,000 and 80,000 t/year. Bananas rank second in importance after cassava in eastern DR Congo and are good sources of carbohydrates, though recent research has confirmed that they also have substantial levels of provitamin A carotenoids. This study was undertaken to establish the contribution of bananas and plantains to the diet and nutrition of Musa-dependent households within eastern DR Congo. The study sites included Beni Territory (North Kivu) and Bukavu Territory (South Kivu). The localities, villages and specific households were established through multistage sampling. Sample size was calculated using Fisher's formula, and mothers/caregivers from 371 households with preschool children were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. Regression analysis with an r^2 threshold of 0.045 was carried out to establish the relationship between dietary diversity and banana consumption. Findings showed that the food group consisting of roots, tubers and bananas was the most popular in both Beni and Bukavu territories, with more than 90% of the households having consumed a food item from this group. Although cassava root is the most popular starchy staple, bananas, especially East African Highland bananas (EAHB), had been consumed by more than 60% of the households in the 24 h preceding the survey. In addition, >50% of households indicated that they had consumed these bananas twice to four times a week and that they were mostly simply boiled. Bananas have a significant role in the diets of preschool children and potentially meet their energy needs and needs for nutrients such as potassium and vitamin A. It is therefore important that interventions or research activities geared towards alleviation of hunger and malnutrition should use bananas and plantains as a vehicle for addressing these problems, especially among Musa-dependent populations.