

Moringa Oleifera and HIV

A Paris-based NGO has joined forces with people living with HIV in Benin in a study into the nutritional benefits of food products produced from Moringa oleifera trees.

The NGO, Médecins du Monde, provides the Moringa oleifera seeds and support for its harvesting and processing by people in seven communes in southern Benin. People with HIV in these communes are currently growing trees on plots of land given to their associations.

The Moringa tree, also called 'kpatima' in the local Fon language, or horseradish tree in English, is a native of India, famed for its exceptional nutritional qualities. For example, Moringa oleifera leaves contain four times more calcium and vitamin A than milk and carrots respectively. Moringa is typically used in the fight against child malnutrition.

Lise Helene Pourteau Adjahi is the coordinator of the Moringa tree project for Médecins du Monde in Benin. She said that growing their own trees allows people with HIV to improve their diets. All parts of the Moringa oleifera tree are edible, and the price of seeds is reasonable. It costs 2,500 CFA, or approximately 5.5 US dollars or 4 Euros, to obtain 100 seeds.

Nicholas Ahouansou is the president of an association of HIV positive people in Comè – one of the municipalities taking part of the project. He said he had never planted a tree in his life, but for many people with HIV who were rejected by their communities and who have lost their livelihoods because they lack strength, this tree provides hope and dignity.

Poor nutrition aggravates the immune deficiency of HIV patients and compromises antiretroviral treatment. Boosting nutrition levels in people living with HIV and AIDS is important in maintaining their health. However, it is important to note that consumption of Moringa, though nutritional, is not a miracle cure and is not a substitute for antiretroviral drugs.

Valerie is one of the farmers living with HIV in the commune of Kpomassé, 35 kilometres from Comè. She said that this plant is wonderful and cultivating her own Moringa oleifera tree makes her more independent. She says she eats everything in the tree from the roots to the leaves and the flowers.

In the future, Médecins du Monde hopes to have HIV positive people generate income by marketing processed Moringa products, thus ensuring the sustainability of such an initiative.