Strengthening the link
Promoting indigenous foods for nutrition in four mega-diverse countries
Borelli, T¹ Wasike V², Ozkan I³, Coradin L, Markovicz Bastos D⁴, Wijosekara A⁵, Hunter D⁶

Providing evidence: are local foods healthier?

Traditional foods are increasingly recognized as a healthy, sustainable and cost-effective alternative to address micronutrient deficiencies that still affect two billion people worldwide. They are:

- cheaper and can be used as a safety net in times of food scarcity
- friendlier to the environment as they are better adapted to growing in their surroundings using less fertilizer
- more resistant to pests and diseases
- in some cases, more wholesome, providing greater amounts of energy, vitamins and minerals than more commonly consumed foods.

The GEF-funded Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition Initiative* (www.b4fn.org), led by Brazil, Kenya, Sri Lanka and Turkey – four countries burdened with malnutrition and yet home to a large variety of indigenous foods whose nutritional value remains largely unknown – is generating nutrition data for 140 indigenous species from the four countries. Promising traditional and/or neglected foods with nutrition potential will be used in food-based strategies to tackle malnutrition and increase dietary diversity, for example through school feeding programmes. While developing markets for local nutritious biodiversity, attention will be given to promoting their conservation and sustainable use to avoid over-exploitation.

Nutritionally-promising foods

Species were selected based on threat status, national food security priorities, existing initiatives such as the Plants for the Future Initiative in Brazil, market potential and availability of food composition data or lack thereof.

- Water content, vitamin C, Calcium, Iron, Magnesium, Phosphorus, Potassium, Sodium, Zinc and Copper, fat, protein, ash, carbohydrates and dietary fibre as well as water soluble vitamins and fat soluble vitamins will be determined for all species. Among these:
  - Brazil (73 species): Feijoa (Acca sellowiana), Cactus (Euphorbia dysenterica), Ucara Palm (Euterpe edulis), Camu camu (Myrciaria dubia), Umbu-cajá (Spondias spp.), Jaboticaba (Myrciaria jaboticaba), Babacá (Myrciaria umbellata), Babacá (Myrciaria umbellata)
  - Kenya (20 species): Malabar spinach (Basella alba), Ethiopian mustard (Brassica campestris), Spider plant (Cleome gynandra), Brown quail (Colinemus ypsilophora)
  - Sri Lanka (6 species, 17 varieties): 7 traditional rice varieties (Oryza sativa L.), 5 varieties of banana (Musa spp.), 4 of yam ( Dioscorea spp.), one of finger millet (Eleusine coracana) and one of Jackfruit (Artocarpus heterophyllus)
  - Turkey (41 species): Shepherd’s purse (Capsella bursa-pastoris), Fossil lily (Enemnus spectabilis), Crown daisy (Chrysanthemum coronarium L.), Common golden thistle (Sisymbrium hispanicum)

Widening the Knowledge base

- Countries are documenting existing edible biodiversity and the traditional knowledge associated with the growing, collection and preparation of local foods in different ecogeographical zones.
- National portals and databases on local foods and associated traditional knowledge are being set up and will be linked to relevant national and global nutritional databases (FAO-INFOODS database).
- The contribution of biodiversity indicators in food composition and consumption data is being documented.
- Increased use and production of traditional agrobiodiversity as a result of project activities is being monitored.

Influencing Policy

- Cross-sectoral national policy platforms have been established engaging representatives from the biodiversity, agriculture, nutrition, health and education sectors.
- Countries are revising national policies including their National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans to identify entry points for promoting the conservation of biodiversity for food and nutrition.
- To promote the use of local biodiversity among key “change agents”, Brazil is developing an interactive e-learning course on mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into nutrition practices.
- The BFN Initiative is actively involved in the CBD/NWO State of Knowledge Review on the Interlinkages between Biodiversity and Human Health.

Raising Awareness

- Best practices that promote the conservation and use of biodiversity for healthier diets are being documented for instance in the Diversifying Food and Diets book (http://www.b4fn.org/the-book/).
- Gaps and opportunities that exist for producers, processors and users to benefit from nutritionally-promising biodiversity are being explored along with new market niches, including institutional markets such as schools and hospitals.
- National information campaigns and diversity fairs are being organised to raise public awareness of the importance of biodiversity for food and nutrition.
- A set of tools and methods generated by countries for the effective mainstreaming of biodiversity into food and nutrition strategies will be shared with relevant practitioners.

Author affiliations:

1. Bioversity International, Rome, Italy
2. Kenya Agricultural Research Institute, Nairobi, Kenya
3. General Directorate of Agricultural Research and Policies, Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Affairs, Ankara, Turkey
4. World Food Programme, the Earth Institute, Columbia University, Crops for the Future, the World Agroforestry Centre and AVRDC – The World Vegetable Center
5. UN Environment Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. This work is part of the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health.
6. Office of the Registrar of Pesticides, Peraleda, Sri Lanka

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Photos: Top left: Cacaitera fruits, Brazil. F. Takagi; Bottom left: Traditional fruits, Kenya. D. Hunter; Centre: Rambutan, Sri Lanka. M. Goode; Top and bottom right: Wild daisy and Aloysus market, Turkey. D. Hunter

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