Ensuring a healthier Africa now and into the future demands a smart, sustainable food system to deliver diets rich in nutritious, plant-based foods such as African traditional vegetables.

These crops were in the spotlight during Power on Your Plate: All-Africa Summit on Diversifying Food Systems with African Traditional Vegetables to Increase Health, Nutrition, and Wealth, 25-28 January 2021 in Arusha, Tanzania and online. The summit sought to advance knowledge and ideas to expand the production and consumption of the crops poised to become Africa’s superfoods.

Africa is home to a large number of plant species with the potential to invigorate the continent’s horticultural value chain -- yet whether consumed as nutritious food or used as the foundation for natural health products, these traditional vegetables remain untapped and underutilized. From an estimated 6,400 species of useful indigenous plants, about 300 are traditional vegetables and about 126 species are widely known and used throughout the continent.

Traditional vegetables support nutrition-sensitive agriculture under climate change because they generally are more nutrient-dense than most commercial vegetable crops, they have lower water requirements, are adapted to poor quality soils, and have higher resistance to pests and diseases.

Traditional vegetables are endangered by displacement with high-energy staple crops, the fact that most traditional vegetables are not registered in national catalogues, lack of promotion and support for their use, lack of human resources capacity focusing on traditional vegetables, and lack of conservation infrastructure.

Because of their relatively low commercial value, little research investment has been made for traditional vegetables; crop improvements have not been fully explored and genetic resources are poorly conserved.

A few African traditional vegetables have become widely adopted across the continent. African eggplant and okra are now grown on large areas and improved varieties are successfully commercialized.

Research and breeding can convert underutilized traditional vegetables into commercially successful crops. Businesses and supportive government policy can unlock the potential of traditional vegetables to create employment and generate income, especially for women and youth. Diversifying diets and farming systems with these crops builds resilience to a changing climate.

In presentations and panel discussions, Power on Your Plate participants called for action: for increased investment, regional R&D programs, and policies to promote traditional vegetables at national and regional levels and fully integrate traditional vegetables into Africa’s food systems.

THE POWER TO PROMOTE
Impact demonstrated

- 64 scientific presentations covering six subject areas and two panel discussions with youth and high-level decisionmakers.
- 175 in-person participants; 312 registered ZOOM participants; and another 200 people followed through the conference app.
- More than 10,000 people viewed the summit in live Facebook feeds.
- Twitter hashtag #PowerOnYourPlate tracks a lively social media discussion that continues today.

THE POWER TO LEARN
Insights shared

- Value addition can increase consumption, especially among urban consumers.
- People already recognize the potential of traditional vegetables; public policy needs to catch up.
- Strategic efforts across sectors are needed to ramp up production.
THE POWER TO CHANGE

Ideas generated

To realize the potential of traditional vegetables in Africa, there is a need to work simultaneously on the “Three Ps”: pulling demand, pushing supply, and providing enabling policy and governance, with a focus on research.

PUSH (supply side)

• Foster innovative approaches to expand availability and affordability of TAVs.
• Strengthen formal and informal seed systems.
• Introduce ‘green’ agricultural practices to guarantee food safety.
• Diversify the traditional vegetable species grown and marketed.
• Increase yields and extend growing seasons in a sustainable manner.
• Reduce postharvest losses by introducing processing technology, shorter supply chains and appropriate market storage space for vegetable vendors.

PULL (demand side)

• Foster innovative approaches to stimulate the acceptability and accessibility of traditional vegetables as part of a healthy diet.
• Establish trust and traceability relationships.
• Shorten the connection lines between producers and consumers to address food safety concerns.
• Create interest in traditional vegetables through information campaigns emphasizing taste, cultural value and ease of preparation as well as nutritional, health and environmental benefits.
• Banks should aim to commit a significant portion of their loan books to regenerative agriculture.
• Extend loan repayment periods for young farmers who may not own land.
• Create a revolving fund for traditional vegetable producers.
• Apply consumer trends in food consumption such as convenience and health to traditional crops.
• Create awareness of the benefits of using quality seed among farmers.
• Train farmers in quality traditional vegetable seed production/processing/marketing.
• Use social media marketing for traditional vegetables.
• Establish Vegetable Business Hubs to provide crop management knowledge and connect producers with traders, processors, input and credit vendors.
• Show young people opportunities in production and value addition through on-farm demonstrations.

POLICY (governance)

• Promote traditional vegetables within local, national and regional initiatives to reduce malnutrition, create employment opportunities, and ensure crucial buy-in from policy- and decision-makers.
• Public procurement of traditional vegetables for school feeding programs, hospitals, military and other institutional clients can increase demand, develop markets for farmers, and address several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs 1, 2, 3, 13 and 15).
• Select and certify priority traditional vegetables to incorporate into national policies.
• Adjust land tenure practices to address access issues for women and young people.
• Provide traditional vegetable seed for vulnerable refugees living in camps.

RESEARCH

• Collect and protect traditional crops and their wild relatives in genebanks to safeguard diversity.
• Collect and share traditional knowledge about these crops.
• Conduct more regional research on traditional crops.
• Breed climate-smart crops.
• Identify local favorites that best fit local agro-ecosystems and diets.
• Dedicate a much greater proportion of national, regional and global R&D efforts to nutritious food, in particular traditional vegetables.

WATCH
Missed the presentations and panel discussions? Check the Power on Your Plate YouTube channel.