

THE NATION

Agriculture: The unlikely Earth Day hero

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Intercropping could solve the problem of hunger

Rising temperatures, erratic weather, population growth, and scarce water resources—along with growing civil unrest and skyrocketing food prices—are putting unprecedented stress on people and the planet. For over 40 years, Earth Day—which is commemorated on April 22—has served as a call to action, mobilising individuals and organisations around the world to address these challenges.

This year, Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project highlights agriculture—often blamed as a driver of environmental problems—as an emerging solution.

Agriculture is a source of food and income for the world's poor and a primary engine for economic growth. It also offers untapped potential for mitigating climate change and protecting biodiversity, and for lifting millions of people out of poverty.

Nourishing the Planet, a two-year evaluation of innovations in agriculture, offers 15 sustainable solutions that are working on the ground to alleviate global hunger while also protecting soil, water, and other vital natural resources.

"Agriculture encompasses such a large chunk of the planet that creating healthy economies, mitigating climate change, and improving livelihoods will require a longstanding commitment to the world's farmers," says Danielle Nierenberg, Nourishing the Planet co-project director.

Past attempts to combat hunger have tended to focus narrowly on a few types of crops, rely heavily on chemical fertilisers and ignore women farmers.

"There's been relatively little focus on low-cost ways to boost soil fertility and make better use of scarce water, and on solutions that exist beyond the farm and all along the food chain," says Worldwatch president Christopher Flavin.

From urban farming projects that are feeding our growing cities to rotational farming practices that store carbon in the soils and help mitigate climate change, small-scale and low-input innovations can go a long way in protecting the environment—not only on Earth Day, but every day.

This Earth Day, Nourishing the Planet offers 15 solutions to guide farmers, scientists, politicians, agribusinesses and aid agencies as they commit to promoting a healthier environment and a more food-secure future. They include: guaranteeing the right to food, harnessing the nutritional and economic potential of vegetables, reducing food waste, feeding cities, getting more crop per drop, using farmers' knowledge in research and development, improving soil fertility, safeguarding local food biodiversity, coping with climate change and building resilience, harnessing the knowledge and skills of women farmers, investing in Africa's land, charting a new path to eliminating hunger, moving ecoagriculture into the mainstream, improving food production from livestock, and going beyond production.

According to Nourishing the Planet, although scarcity and famine dominate the discussion of food security in sub-Saharan Africa, many countries are unequipped to deal with the crop surpluses that lead to low commodity prices and food waste.

"Helping farmers better organise their means of production—from ordering inputs to selling their crops to a customer—can help them become more resilient to fluctuations in global food prices and better serve local communities that need food. In Uganda, the organisation TechnoServe has helped to improve market conditions for banana farmers by forming business groups through which they can buy inputs, receive technical advice, and sell their crops collectively," notes Nourishing the Planet, which also notes that 239 million of the world's nearly 1 billion hungry people live in sub-Saharan Africa.—*NourishingThePlanet*