



Powerful Ideas, Practical Actions

Feeding the World: It's Not About Quantity

The resilience of our food supply is as much about the quality and diversity of our food sources as it is about how much we produce.

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Today's sky-rocketing food prices are pushing more people into poverty, threatening the livelihoods of small-scale farmers, and raising concerns about global food security. At first glance, the problem seems to be one of quantity; high prices at the grocery store and local market appear to provide justification for large-scale, industrial food production. But, food security (the resilience of our food supply) is as much about the quality and diversity of our food sources as it is about how much food we produce.

A recent report by the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project finds that the solutions to the price crisis won't necessarily come from producing more food. Rather, encouraging agricultural diversity and local food production—particularly of vegetables—can help communities boost their self-sufficiency and protect vulnerable populations from price shocks.

“We live in a world in which we produce more food than ever before and in which the hungry have never been so many.”

-Olivier De Shutter

Nourishing the Planet conducted on-the-ground research in 25 countries across sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting environmentally sustainable agricultural innovations that help alleviate hunger. Researchers met with over 250 farmers' groups, scientists, NGOs, and government agencies, whose stories are highlighted in the recently released State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planetreport. These innovations are encouraging local, diversified food production, and offer models that can scaled up and replicated around the world.

Mainstream agricultural approaches typically focus on a handful of staple crops. Just three grains—maize, wheat, and rice—make up nearly 70 percent of the world's food supply. When food producers rely on so few crops for their incomes, they are vulnerable to price volatility on the global market. In Guinea, for example, cashews dominate the agricultural sector. Farmers abandon their vegetable gardens, focusing on cashew

harvests destined for export. If cashew prices fall, so do the incomes of farmers—leaving them without other food sources on which to fall back.

By selling locally and growing an array of crops, farmers are less vulnerable to market fluctuations and can sell food throughout the year. Diversification “helps protect against the risks of climate change, predators, and epidemics of diseases that attack crops,” says Serena Milano, general secretary of Slow Food International’s Foundation for Biodiversity.

Slow Food International’s 1,000 Gardens in Africa project has worked with schools, villages, and small communities in over 15 African countries to develop food gardens. Farmers are producing nutritious food on their community vegetable plots, spreading knowledge about local products and recipes, and helping to diversify local food systems. In Cote D’Ivoire and Uganda, Slow Food-supported gardens promote intercropping of vegetables with other trees and medicinal herbs. In N’Ganon village in Cote d’Ivoire, women are cultivating tomatoes, eggplant, and cabbage on a seven-acre plot. Much of this food is eaten by their families and students at the local school, and the rest is sold at the local market.



[In Kenya, Farmers Grow](#)

[Their Own Way](#)

Thousands of grassroots, African-led efforts are building locally rooted alternatives to the chemical agriculture promoted by the Gates Foundation and Monsanto.

In Mali, the Dogon people are growing a variety of vegetables and grains, conserving seeds, and developing varieties that are well-adapted to the region’s arid conditions. Farmers cultivate traditional foods, including fruit trees, like mango and banana; grains, like millet and fonio; and vegetables and legumes, all on small, single-hectare plots. Local women are adding value to local flowers, fruits, and leaves of plants by turning them into seasonings and spices, collectively known as somè. Dogon spices are “reigniting an interest in and a taste for local seasonings, which are less expensive and healthier” than the many imported snack foods used in Mali,” says Milano.

Growing traditional vegetables can improve food security and brings multiple benefits for farmers. “Vegetables have shorter cycles, are faster-growing than cereal crops, and

require little space,” says Abdou Tenkouano, director of AVRDC-The World Vegetable Center's Regional Center for Africa. And compared to imported varieties or other types of crops, indigenous vegetables are more resistant to droughts, diseases, and pests, “which are likely to increase as climate change worsens,” he adds.

Research organizations are working with farmers across the African continent to develop improved vegetable varieties and promote increased consumption of traditional crops like amaranth, cowpea, African nightshade, and African eggplant. And awareness campaigns, including on-farm evaluations, field days, and demonstration plots, are raising demand for local food. As these local varieties become widely adopted, the perception that indigenous food is eaten only by poor people is changing.

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In Tanzania, varieties of African eggplant now regularly appear in supermarkets, and one study found that villages where farmers are growing eggplant had higher incomes and levels of women’s ownership. In Uganda’s Mukono district, Project DISC (Developing Innovations in School Cultivation) is rekindling an interest in traditional foods by teaching school children how to grow and cook indigenous vegetables.

These innovations point to sustainable solutions that focus less on increasing food production and more on creating resilient, local food systems.

“We live in a world in which we produce more food than ever before and in which the hungry have never been so many,” writes Olivier De Shutter, U.N. Special Reporter on the Right to Food, in the foreword to State of the World 2011. Plenty of initiatives on the ground take this simple message to heart, seeking not just to produce more food but to produce it in a way that nourishes both people and the planet. It’s time we give these initiatives the attention and funding they deserve.