

Foods from the past, foods of the future - Investing in neglected and under-utilized species for resilient and healthy food systems

On 23 March 2021, IFAD nutrition team released five How-to-Do Notes on investing in nutrition-sensitive agriculture through Neglected and Underutilized Species (NUS) and implementation in the design of sustainable development projects.

The reports were launched at the webinar - [Foods from the past, foods of the future - Investing in neglected and under-utilized species \(NUS\) for resilient and healthy food systems](#) - in partnership with Alliance Bioversity International, CIAT and GFAR.

The webinar was moderated by IFAD Director of the Environment, Climate, Gender and Social Inclusion Division, Jyotsna Puri, who welcomed participants with a celebration of the long-standing partnership between IFAD, Bioversity and CIAT; from financing the first grant to conduct a research on NUS with Bioversity International and Swaminathan Research Foundation in India in the 1990s, to the launch of the Framework for Supporting Nutrition-sensitive Agriculture through use of Neglected and Underutilized Species in 2019. Jyotsna provided a short overview on the emerging recommendation of the IFAD Rural Development Report vis-à-vis NUS.

Stephen Potter, Director of Agriculture and Food Systems Division at Global Affairs Canada, delivered his opening remarks. *“We continue to work together to recover from the pandemic and build resilience. We must actively seek opportunities to build nutrition and NUS into our response and approach to food system recovery. We must shape food systems to deliver safe, affordable and nutritious diets. We need to diversify production and improve how food produced but also how it is processed and distributed, marketed and consumed.”* Stephen pointed out that agrobiodiversity could be a safeguard against hunger and a source of nutrient rich species for improved dietary diversity. It can play a large role in expanding a market opportunities and improving the livelihoods and well-being of smallholder farmers particularly indigenous peoples and women.

Carlo Fadda explained that the label “neglected” may be misleading or biased. NUS have been neglected by science, markets, buyers and the consumers who are disconnected from food production: *“The farmers who know and recognise the value of NUS and continue to produce them. The farmer’s knowledge, therefore, is valuable to value these species. NUS are the heritage of small-scale farmers around the world. We must make sure that if those*

crops are made commercial around the world the five million small-scale farmers must not be forgotten and must benefit from the wider marketing of these crops”.

Irish Baguilat described NUS as an “enabler” and a potential game-changer for rural women farmers who remain underserved and ignored in the global forum. Irish explained that *“Many NUS are grown in homestead gardens, which are usually taken care by women, provide for household consumption as well as for sale at local markets... Rural women are the primary knowledge holders on how to cultivate and use NUS. So addressing the issue of NUS is in effect addressing gendered structures in society. The entry of NUS into markets provides space for women in the markets and in the decision-making processes of society.”*

On NUS in value chains, John Mulumba Wasswa, highlighted a common criticism that “NUS cannot feed the world”, but caveated this by arguing that NUS encompasses an enormous diversity and distribution of species that are still understudied and poorly communicated from their places of origin to the rest of the world. Indeed, a convincing case can be made for NUS with regard to nutrition and resilience, as described by Maureen Muketha: *“Some species are rich in protein and micronutrients and they are climate resilient in their local areas. They are also economically viable as they do not require high agricultural input and can be grown on marginalised land.”* She went on to explain that buying local is a key message that can help to promote NUS and agrobiodiversity.

Christina Bowerman gave evidence of how chefs can support the use and marketability of NUS and local produce responsibly and protect the livelihoods of these producers, giving an example of the [Adotta un produttore](#) or *adopt a producer* programme that she is a part of – that she believes could be replicated internationally.

To close, Alessandro Meschinelli, Coordinator at the Global Forum for Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR), surmised that the use of forgotten species is key to supporting forgotten knowledge and forgotten people. He pointed out the importance of language – small-scale producers and not “beneficiaries” they are “actors” and we must reconcile scientific knowledge with local knowledge: *“These are not NUS, or the crops of the poor, these are the crops of the future. What is of crucial importance here is to look at bio-cultural diversity – not just the crops, but the cultural value, the songs, the dances, the festivals that go with the species.”*

[Watch the full event and download the How To Do Notes.](#)