

Network Vegetable Production in Africa: its contribution to conservation and use of traditional vegetables

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The Network Vegetable Production in Africa (NEVEPA) is a project financed by the German Government and implemented by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ). The project is assisting African countries in setting up national Networks on Vegetable Production and facilitates interaction among the networks in different countries. The first network was established in Tanzania and at present other networks are emerging in Ethiopia and Uganda. The main aim of these networks is the improvement of information exchange among all partners in the development of the vegetable production sector. The project's concept is based on the fact that there is sufficient know-how and knowledge, but that this is underutilized.

The production and utilization of vegetables can make a much-needed contribution to better nutrition and income in many African countries. The use and conservation of traditional vegetables have been neglected over the last 20 years and there is a serious threat that many species will drop out of use in some areas if no appropriate countermeasures are taken. Traditional vegetables are neglected because they have been gathered from the wild and have not been cultivated; thus the commercial value attached to them has been low. Knowledge about different species has been restricted to small rural communities, and with the increasing migration into towns and urban centres the preservation of this knowledge is in danger.

Many programmes for the promotion and increasing use of traditional vegetables have failed because they addressed only one aspect of their use. NEVEPA therefore works on a different principle. Its programme for the promotion and increased utilization of traditional vegetables involves many different partners. The starting point has been local knowledge about species which are locally preferred. These have been collected and a seed production programme has been started, either by women's groups or as a community-based effort. The seed production scheme puts a commercial value on traditional vegetables, which has rarely been associated with these species.

At the same time the Network is cooperating with another regional projects working on the promotion of the production of vegetables in cities. Urban centres, with their rapidly increasing population, are an especially important expanding market, in particular for cheap vegetables, as the majority of city dwellers are poor. Traditional vegetables are very often leafy vegetables, which are perishable and need to be produced at or near the site of utilization. As many city dwellers have an agricultural background, they are familiar with the production of vegetables, even though they may have been forced to end up in urban jobs. They start production often in order to secure their own food base, but if proper production and marketing strategies are applied, considerable income can be generated.

What is the connection between such efforts and the conservation of traditional vegetables? The philosophy of the project is that an important way of securing the conservation of traditional vegetables is their utilization. There are different partners in this system of utilization and conservation with which the project works. First, there is the farmer and her husband, with their local knowledge on the potential use and occurrence of traditional vegetables. There are also community-based NGOs and self help groups. Women's groups are particularly important, because of their knowledge and responsibility for household food security. As income-generation, the production of seed of traditional vegetables gives an

excellent opportunity. Because of the necessary selection of true-to-type seed plants, there is also a considerable amount of vegetables available for consumption.

Big seed producers do not usually bother with the small amounts of different traditional vegetables in their production programme and therefore these seed programmes have very little competition to fear. For the establishment of proper marketing channels, the project is using private middlemen, very often related to the seed producers or the producers of the vegetables in the urban centres. Because of this relationship there is no need for profit-hungry dealers and shopowners. In this way a closed circle of interest groups is established in which the common interest is the sustainable use of traditional vegetables.