

INDIGENOUS VEGETABLES BECOMING INCREASINGLY POPULAR IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Rudy Schippers, Food Security Department, Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, Central Avenue, Chatham, Kent ME4 4TB. Email: r.r.schippers@gre.ac.uk

The production and marketing of indigenous vegetables in both the dry and wet seasons in Cameroon and Uganda during 1997/98 have been investigated as part of a DFID funded project "**Opportunities and constraints in the subsistence production and marketing of indigenous vegetables in East and Central Africa**".

A total of five survey areas were chosen to reflect the diversity of agro-ecological conditions in Central Africa: highland humid forest zone; lowland humid forest zone, semi-arid zone, urban and peri-urban zone. Work in each of the survey areas was conducted in collaboration with a different institute. These were Dschang University of Agriculture; Institut de la Recherche Agronomique (IRA); International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA); Makerere University and Kawanda Agricultural Research Institute. The main findings from over 1,000 interviews in total are summarised below.

Indigenous vegetables have both subsistence and income value for the poor

In both countries indigenous vegetables were found to play an important role in both income generation and subsistence production. All the surveys provided evidence that indigenous vegetables offered a significant opportunity for the poorest people to earn a living, as producers and/or traders, without requiring large capital investments. Indigenous vegetables are also very important for poor households because their prices are relatively affordable.

The volume of production and trade of indigenous vegetables has increased

The volume of production and the number of traders of indigenous vegetables has increased in response to growing urban populations, but may also be a result of the economic crisis which has forced consumers to switch to cheaper alternatives. Lower capital requirements make the indigenous vegetable market more competitive implying lower profits. However this is not always the case. In Kampala, farmers reported that nakati was the most profitable vegetable crop. This is partly due to the fact that in comparison to exotic crops, it requires fewer purchased inputs, matures faster and the harvesting period is longer than most exotic crops.

Women have an important role in both production and marketing

Women are key players in the production, processing and marketing of indigenous vegetables. For these women and their families, the meagre revenues earned are of the utmost importance.

Indigenous vegetables remain popular

Indigenous vegetables such as African nightshades, amaranth, garden eggs, bitterleaf and many others remain popular especially in rural areas where they are often considered to be more tasty and nutritious than exotic vegetables. Tomato and onion are the most popular exotic crops although they are regarded by many as traditional foods.

Marketing chains are well established

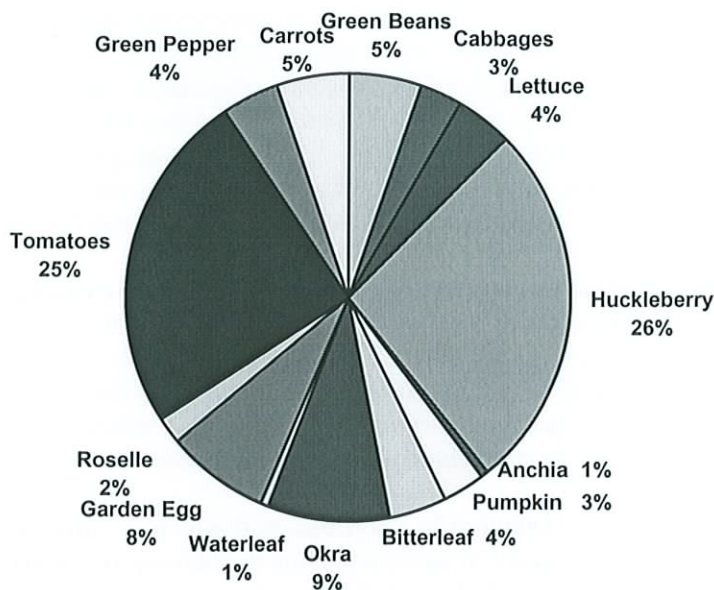
The marketing chains for indigenous vegetables are well established, especially for the more commercial crops such as huckleberry in Cameroon and nakati in Uganda. Because of their perishability, the vegetables are harvested either the evening before the market day or during the day of the market, quite often through contractual arrangements with wholesalers. Some wholesalers provide farmers with credit. Others prefer to sell to traders on a first come first

served basis or to the highest bidder. Retail prices remain constant but the volume in each unit varies between seasons; the size of the bundles is reduced in the dry season.

Trader details

About 90% of the vegetable retailers were women and most of them were farmers who brought their vegetables from their farms or bought extra supplies from other farmers in their villages. The traders ranged in age from 25 to 45 years.

Proportion of sellers by crop in the market of Foubot, Cameroon.



There was evidence to suggest that the number of traders and the volumes traded has increased over the years in response to the growing demand from urban areas. Retailers have also increased the range of vegetables to reduce the risk of depending upon few types of vegetables.

Conclusion

The displacement of traditional African vegetables by exotics has come to a turning point whereby indigenous crops have started to play a more important role in the diet of millions of people in Africa. Similar trends are becoming increasingly apparent in East and Southern Africa. There is a need to raise the profile of Africa's indigenous vegetables and to increase research efforts and promotion activities to better utilise their potential as a valuable local food resource.

Particular needs in the post-harvest area include: appropriate processing to overcome shortages during the dry season and the development of suitable management practices for highly perishable leafy vegetables.