



Underutilized Plants for Wellbeing and Sustainable Development

Key Note Speech
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**International Symposium on Underutilized Plant Species for
food, nutrition, income and sustainable development**

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Summary

The International Centre for Underutilized Crops (ICUC), the lead Convenor of this event, aim to stop and indeed reverse biodiversity loss in farming systems. And in so doing, it is concerned with developing agricultural landscapes and markets that work for smallholder farmers and local agricultural entrepreneurs. Underutilized crops have traditionally been used for food, fibre, fodder, oil and medicinal plants. Their potential contribution to food security, nutrition, health, income generation, and ecosystem services for the wellbeing of mankind is still largely under-exploited. Agricultural biodiversity is challenged by weak knowledge base on the significance of agricultural biodiversity, including its value to society, and potential for development; emphasis on plants especially the main staples and the neglect of others; over-emphasis on conservation for future use at expense of sustainable use for the present and future; gene banks as independent organs in the maintenance of agricultural biodiversity with little or no link to other arms of agricultural research and communities; and not least, policy and strategies that do not often directly promote wellbeing. The FARA-led Agricultural biodiversity initiative for Africa (ABIA) is a platform that aims to respond to the aforementioned challenges and generate greater visibility, resources and collaborative engagement in support of agricultural biodiversity management, conservation and use in Africa. The ABIA will galvanize countries and institutions to work together on agricultural biodiversity issues, and support SROs and the CGIAR agricultural biodiversity instruments and networks to promote mainstreaming of agricultural biodiversity in agricultural development and wellbeing.

Key words: *underutilized species, agricultural biodiversity initiative for Africa, conservation, sustainable use, wellbeing*

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Honourable
Heads of Missions and International Organizations
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen
Participants

I feel highly honoured and pleased to have been invited to join you on this important event of the *International Symposium on Underutilized Plant Species for food, nutrition, income and sustainable development*. May I therefore Mme Convenor, firstly extend heartfelt congratulations and best wishes from the Chairperson of the FARA Executive Board, Dr D. Kyetere.

Mme Convenor, although Underutilized crops have traditionally been used for food, fibre, fodder, oil and medicinal plants, their potential contribution to food security, nutrition, health, income generation, and ecosystem services for the wellbeing of mankind is still largely under-exploited.

I note with satisfaction, that the International Centre for Underutilized Crops (ICUC), the lead Convenor of this event, aim to stop and indeed, reverse the biodiversity loss in farming systems. And in so doing, it is concerned with developing agricultural landscapes and markets that work for smallholder farmers and local agricultural micro-entrepreneurs.

Despite an estimated 7,000 species playing a crucial role in poor people's livelihoods and many of these have a significant potential for commercialization, at present however, only 150 plant species have been noted for use and commercialization on a global scale. Out of these, rice, wheat and maize dominate and together, these provide over 50% of the world's protein and calorie needs. Alongside their commercial potential however, many underutilized plant species also provide important environmental services.

Mme Convenor, Dear participants, Ladies and gentlemen, this event is timely. The recently concluded FARA General Assembly 2007 endorsed a FARA-led Agricultural Biodiversity Initiative for Africa (ABIA) to conserve and sustainably USE agricultural biodiversity for prosperity. And in turn, the upcoming Bioersity Conference in Germany in 2009 in preparation for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Ordinary Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 9) to the CBD respectively.

Although agricultural biodiversity is fundamental to agricultural development and human welfare, its management in Africa is challenged by:

(i) weak knowledge base on the significance of agricultural biodiversity, including its value to society, and potential for development;

- (ii) too much emphasis on plants especially the main staples and the neglect of other domains;
- (iii) over-emphasis on conservation for future use at expense of USE and management for present and future challenges;
- (iv) *gene* banks often seen as independent organ in the maintenance of agricultural biodiversity, with little or no link with other arms of agricultural research and with communities; and not least
- (v) policy and strategies that do not often directly promote wellbeing.

Generally, efforts in agricultural biodiversity management and USE, at both country and regional levels, have been inadequate and largely uncoordinated, due both to financial and policy limitations. The inadequacies have worked against optimizing benefits from these resources, and contributed to the loss of valuable genetic resources in Africa.

The FARA led Agro-biodiversity initiative (ABIA) is therefore a PLATFORM to generate visibility, resources and collaborative engagement in support of agricultural biodiversity management, conservation and USE in Africa. ABIA will galvanize countries and institutions to work together on agricultural biodiversity issues, and support SROs and the CGIAR agricultural biodiversity instruments and networks to promote mainstreaming of agricultural biodiversity in agricultural development and wellbeing.

Not only will this symposium fit into the ABIA initiative, it will also contribute and strengthen FARA's Networking Support Functions (NSFs) and SCARDA, SSA CP, DONATA, and RAILS will all benefit from information exchange and lesson learning. I believe that a South-South dialogue between African, Asian and Latin American delegates will contribute greatly to strengthening Africa's research capacity especially in the conservation and USE of neglected orphan crops.

At the *First International Research Conference on Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Natural Resource Management* held in Kigali in July 2007, His Excellency Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda, indicated that the only sustainable way to guarantee the success of a biodiversity agenda, and indeed to conserve any country's natural resources, is to ensure that policy actions lead to socioeconomic transformation and improved quality of life. He therefore called for a shift in paradigm in which conservation was largely seen as a Government responsibility, to one where biodiversity protection is viewed as a profitable business opportunity – for both mainstream enterprise and small business. President Kagame further emphasized the need to develop

business models that make sound use of available natural resources, with a view to generate dividends for all levels of society – especially the economically vulnerable rural communities. In short, President Kagame is confirming the efficient conservation and USE of genetic resources including underutilized species for society's wellbeing. This, Mme Convenor, remains the fundamental challenge.

Thus the emerging interest on underutilized species and in particular minor crops, demonstrate renewed public and private attention on biodiversity and its sustainable use of new crops for 'new uses', and 'new markets', hence this international conference is well placed.

Mme Convenor, while physical characteristics in particular; agronomic traits, appearance, processing qualities, taste, storability, nutritional elements, a range of possible uses, and environmental adaptability have all contributed to the success of the world's major crops, the successful improvement and promotion of neglected underutilized crops has been constrained by the aforementioned challenges. This is further worsened by the limited number of orphan crop germplasm in gene banks and the limited number of scientists and development agents working on these minor crops. It is obvious that crop diversification at all levels and all types of agro-ecologies is the most crucial element of sustainable ecosystem services. The narrow portfolio of global agriculture therefore raises major concerns on how effectively, major crops alone, can contribute to food security and poverty alleviation, improved nutrition, income, and sustainable ecosystem services.

In conclusion Mme Convenor, permit me to illustrate the significant contribution of the African rice cultivar—*Oryza glaberrima*, an underutilized and fading specie to societal wellbeing. In the 1990s, WARDA researchers began to screen WARDA's holdings of African rice cultivars, having discovered that *O. glaberrima* an underutilized specie, had a number of agronomic properties suitable for use by farmers working in low input conditions. This influenced the decision to re-open the possibility of hybridising the high yielding, reduced lodging and shattering associated with the Asian rice—*O. sativa* with the highly stress resilient African *glaberimma*. These were then released as NERICA (new rices for Africa) types. Today, the NERICAs provide a welcome relief for Africa's rice farmers and provide new opportunity for sustainable agricultural development especially in rainfed environments where most of Africa's rice farmers earn a living.

As this landmark event is co-convened by ICUC with Bioversity International, the Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species, GlobalHort, AVRDC-The World Vegetable Center, PROTA, the International Society for Horticultural Science and FARA, I wish to reaffirm FARA's

commitment to work with all stakeholders involved in the use and conservation of underutilized species in particular and plant genetic resources in general. In this regard Dear participants, I want to reassure you that the FARA-led Agro-biodiversity initiative for Africa (ABIA) will provide a continental platform for the advancement and sustainable use of underutilized and neglected species both within and outside Africa.

Thank you and God bless.