Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Regional Workshop on Neglected and Underutilized Species for Zero Hunger: Status, Progress and Way Forward

Regional Initiative on Zero Hunger Challenge (RI-ZHC)

FAO RAP

11-12 December 2017

Bangkok, Thailand

Concept Note

1. Background

Eradicating hunger and malnutrition is a major challenge in Asia and the Pacific, especially where low-income smallholder farmers in developing countries are concerned. Agriculture has to be made more sustainable – environmentally, economically and socially – and diverse, while improving healthy diets. This is indispensable for addressing hunger and malnutrition in a changing climate. An enabling environment has to be created to promote diversification of food production and consumption for national food security and nutrition.

This requires agriculture to be more climate resilient, less dependent on chemical fertilizers, and associated with lower methane emissions from rice cultivation and methane and nitrous oxide emissions from livestock. At the same time, farmers, particularly smallholders should be able to earn higher incomes for economic sustainability, which will enable households to afford a better, more varied diet, with higher intakes of protein as well as micronutrients.

Yet agriculture in this region is over-reliant on a handful of major staple crops, which poses inherent nutritional, agronomic, ecological and economic risks. Globally, only three crops—wheat, rice and maize—covered 40% of all arable land globally, delivering more than 50% of the world's consumption of calories and protein. About 95% of the world's food needs are provided by just 30 species of plants. In Asia, rice continues to be the dominant food.

Preserving agrobiodiversity is essential for reducing dangers of relying excessively on a few crops. Neglected and underutilized crops species (NUS; sometimes called “forgotten”, “underexploited”, “minor", "orphan", "promising" and "little-used") are an essential component of agrobiodiversity.

These crops tend to be climate resilient and well adapted to arid and semi-arid agro-ecological zones, help fix nitrogen in the soil and are a relatively cheap source of protein, vitamins and micronutrients. By fixing nitrogen in the soil, pulses and legumes, in particular, reduce the need for chemical fertilizer and by providing substitutes for animal protein, they reduce the number of animals that need to be kept for meat and other livestock products, besides providing better nutrition. But it must be conceded that they do have some drawbacks. NUS are thus considered important for addressing the Zero Hunger Challenge.

NUS are abundant in most Asian countries. However, their potential nutritional and market value, as well as their suitability for climate-adaption are underexploited. Scoping, prioritizing and promoting wider use of NUS provides an opportunity to diversify food systems and enhance resilience to both biotic and abiotic stress.

However, reorienting agricultural policies away from a focus on cereal production and consumption is not easy as influential groups benefit from the current policies. Smallholder farmers who wish to diversify their crops need support which they do not get under the present system. There is therefore a need to a) better understand the scope for diversifying agriculture to include NUS; b) identify the policy and institutional changes that will be required for this, and c) describe the support systems that will be needed to create an enabling environment to help realize the potential gains in terms of nutrition, climate adaptation and income generation.

In view of FAO's existing knowledge on the food system approach and long standing experience on NUS, building on successful experience of International Year of Potato, International Year of Quinoa, and the International Year of Pulses, FAO is well placed to provide advice and support to its member countries on policies to promote NUS. This is being done through the RI-ZHC.

Accordingly, the proposed workshop builds on the FAO/ACIAR's Regional Expert Consultation on Scoping and Prioritization of Neglected and Underutilized Crop Species held in December 2016 and ongoing FAO Regional TCP on Creating Enabling Environment on Nutrition-sensitive Agriculture (TCP/RAS/3602) and national TCP projects under Regional Initiative on Zero Hunger. Its main objectives are described below.

2. Objectives

The main objective of the workshop is to (1) take stock of the work on scoping and prioritization of Future Smart Food among NUS for Zero Hunger that has already been done, (2) draw lessons from the work done for the Regional TCP under Zero Hunger Initiative, and (3) identify the way forward and new work that can be integrated under RI-ZHC.

3. Outputs

Expected outputs from this regional event are (i) stock-taking of the work on scoping and prioritization of NUS for Zero Hunger and a reaffirmed list of Future Smart Food among NUS for ZHC; (ii) clarified workplan of Regional TCP; and (iii) new activities identified related to the Regional TCP for 2018-19 biennium.

4. Participants

Participants for this event will include government officials, national experts, consultants, international experts and FAO staff from HQ, RAP and country offices.