
Background

The potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) originated in the Andes of South America. It was appropriate, therefore, that the initial impetus for declaring 2008 as the International Year of the Potato came from the Government of Peru.



Flag of Peru

At the biennial Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in November 2005, the Permanent

Representative of Peru proposed – and the Conference adopted – a resolution that sought to focus world attention on the importance of the potato in providing food security and alleviating poverty. The resolution was transmitted to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, with the aim of having the UN General Assembly declare the year 2008 as the International Year of the Potato (IYP).

The Sixtieth Session of the General Assembly accepted the resolution in December 2005, and invited FAO to facilitate the implementation of IYP 2008. The resolution noted that the potato is a staple food in the diet of the world's population, and affirmed the role that the potato could play in achieving internationally agreed development objectives, including the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

IYP concept

The International Year of the Potato aimed at raising the profile of this globally important food crop and commodity, giving emphasis to its biological and nutritional attributes, and thus promoting its production, processing, consumption, marketing and trade.

Celebration of IYP 2008 presented a unique opportunity to make a valid and effective contribution towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals:

✱ **Food security – improving access to safe and nutritious food.**

IYP focused global attention on the need to reach the vulnerable with solutions that reduce constraints, create opportunities, improve productivity and reduce risks in the farming systems on which they depend.

Despite the great increase in global food production over the past half-century, many individuals and communities – mainly in rural areas – do not have physical or financial access to food year round. Undernourishment places vulnerable people in a downward spiral of bad health that frequently ends in death. Furthermore, HIV/AIDS and social and political conflicts have disrupted access to traditional sources of nutrition, thereby creating large groups of at-risk individuals. Many developing countries face a “double burden” of malnutrition: the persistence of undernutrition, along with a rapid rise in overweight due to unhealthy diets associated with urbanization. The



6 ✱ International Year of
the Potato 2008
*New light on a hidden
treasure*

Millennium Development Goals to which IYP contributed



Goal 1: Eradicate
extreme poverty and
hunger



Goal 4: Reduce child
mortality



Goal 5: Improve
maternal health



Goal 7: Ensure
environmental
sustainability



Goal 8: Develop a
global partnership
for development

cultivation of nutrient-rich potatoes can contribute to improved diets thus reducing mortality rates caused by malnutrition. As well as improving food security, such action will inevitably improve the health of target populations, especially women and children.

✱ **Poverty alleviation**

IYP focused global attention on the need to alleviate poverty by increasing incomes and linking farmers to markets.

Many farming families are caught in a “poverty trap” in which limited livelihood options conspire to keep them poor. Those livelihoods often need either slight or radical reworking to provide consistent income that enables the family to move – and stay – out of poverty. Local markets, once safe from outside competition, now face increased penetration from a wide range of suppliers due to globalization and urbanization. Learning to innovate and engage with markets, and to become more competitive, are challenges for small scale farming families. In order to compete in regional and global markets, they need yield-improving and input-saving technologies to help close the persistent yield and cost gap.

✱ **Sustainable intensification of potato-based farming systems**

IYP focused global attention on solutions for sustainable intensification of farming systems that will stop or reverse the loss of natural resources.

Most of the world’s farms are less than 2 ha in size. In sub-Saharan Africa and many parts of Asia, farms are still shrinking and may continue to do so for the next several generations. As farm size shrinks, many farming families are switching from grains and legumes to root and tuber crops to meet subsistence and income goals. Farms with declining area are being managed more and more intensively, leading to soil erosion and ecological imbalances that encourage pest and disease outbreaks.

✱ **Sustainable use of biodiversity**

IYP focused global attention on the range of actions needed to protect, conserve and utilize potato diversity.

To overcome the multiple challenges of plant pests and diseases, low yields, natural resources degradation, and drought and climate change, potato-based agricultural systems need a continual supply of new, improved varieties. That implies access to the genetic resources contained in the totality of potato biodiversity, which needs to be conserved, and at the same time, made available to researchers and breeders in a responsible and equitable way.



Participants at the launch of the International Year of the Potato, at UN Headquarters in New York. From left: J. Godfrey, Chairman of CIP; R. N. Mayanja, Assistant Secretary-General; S. Kerim, President of the 62nd session of the General Assembly; J. Diouf, Director-General of FAO; I. Benavides, Minister for Agriculture of Peru and L. Mérorès, Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council.

Launching the International Year

The International Year of the Potato was officially launched at United Nations headquarters in New York on 18 October 2007. The day's celebrations included the official launching ceremony, held in the ECOSOC Chamber, a special supporting event for IYP partners, and an exhibit on potato and IYP for the general public.

The official launching ceremony was held in conjunction with observation of World Food Day 2007, with the theme "Right to food".

It was attended by high-ranking United Nations officials, representatives of country missions to the UN, members of the IYP Informal International Steering Committee,

representatives of the US "potato community", and 300 schoolchildren from the Washington DC area.

Following the official launch, a special event was held in the ECOSOC Chamber for

IYP partners, including governments and major international organizations, public and private sector organizations, NGOs and civil society.

The IYP exhibit was held from 16 to 19 October. It included IYP information materials, potato plants provided by Cornell University, plastic

replicas of tuber biodiversity from CIP, information on nutritional aspects of potato, and a video and photographs on potato from Peru.

Spud we like

The United Nations hopes that greater awareness of the merits of potatoes will contribute to the achievement of its Millennium Development Goals. It is always the international year of this or month of that. But the potato's unusual history means it is well worth celebrating...

The Economist
28 February 2008

Tremendous opportunity

The declaration by the United Nations of 2008 as the International Year of the Potato will provide multiple opportunities to publicize the role of the potato as a staple food for everyone.

El Comercio
18 October 2007