



Concept Note

Regional Symposium 31 May – 2 June 2012

“Promotion of underutilized indigenous food resources for food security and nutrition
in Asia and the Pacific”

Background and Rationale

Reduced dietary diversity has serious effects on the nutrition and health of rural and urban populations and deprives rural farmers of opportunity to generate income from their produce, whereas dietary diversification is widely accepted as a cost-effective and sustainable way of improving malnutrition. Neglected and underutilized food resources constitute the bedrock of the diversity in traditional and indigenous food systems of developing country communities. Traditional and indigenous foods are less deleterious to the environment and address cultural needs and preserve cultural heritage of local communities.

Indigenous people living in rural areas possess food resources that are usually not completely understood by agriculture and health sectors. This means that the usual processes of nutrition assessment and identification of food-based strategies for micronutrient promotion cannot take these resources into full consideration for planning. Indigenous peoples are often the most marginalized and disadvantaged for health care and other resources for well-being, and extreme poverty is often the result. Thus, most governments designate their indigenous peoples as those most in need of public health attention and food security. For these residents in rural developing areas, the “lifestyle and nutrition transition” experience means decreasing consumption of fish, wildlife, domestic animals and locally grown crops (rich sources of micronutrients) and increased consumption of industrially processed food. Poor micronutrient intake is a likely consequence, coincident with increasing obesity and other chronic diseases associated with increased caloric consumption in the form of simple carbohydrates and fat.

Successful food systems in transition effectively draw on locally-available food, food variety and traditional food culture. This involves empirical research, public policy, promotion and applied action in support of multisectoral and community based strategies linking rural producers and urban consumers with traditional and underutilized food systems. A few micronutrient promotion strategies using local food resources have demonstrated success. It is necessary to be aware of special considerations if successful food studies and nutrition-promotion activities are to be carried out with indigenous peoples using their own local food. Tools for the evaluation of traditional food systems of indigenous peoples would be helpful. Techniques for understanding local food availability and use, including scientific data for species, food harvest, storage and preparation practices, its acceptability for vulnerable members of the population; and potential for increased food availability and consumption are necessary data. There is also need to identify linkages between biodiversity, food and nutrition through a series of compiled case studies.

Lack of nutritional and agronomic information, a negative attitude towards traditional indigenous foods (termed foods for poor), policies that do not recognize sufficiently the important role of these foods in food security and health and lack of advocates/champions to promote traditional and indigenous foods. Traditional and indigenous food systems once lost are hard to recreate, underlining the imperative for timely documentation, compilation and dissemination of eroding knowledge of biodiversity and the use of food culture for promoting sustainable diets.

Objectives

The objectives of the regional symposium are:

- i) to raise awareness on the role and value of underutilized indigenous food resources to dietary diversity and household food security;
- ii) to share experiences and lessons learned for the promotion of partnership and networking among stakeholders at all levels; and
- iii) to identify policy options and strategic actions for the promotion of underutilized indigenous food resources in Asia and the Pacific region, including evidence based research

The discussions will be focusing on indigenous plants and animals including those from wild nature collected from uncultivated land, forest and from aquatic environments.

Outputs/Outcomes

- Case studies presented and documented highlighting efforts in promoting underutilized indigenous food resources.
- Policy recommendations, and short and medium-term action plans formulated to support sustainable use of underutilized indigenous food resources.
- A network of stakeholders established for knowledge sharing and future collaboration
- Publication on indigenous food resources in Asia and the Pacific for promoting and disseminating underutilized indigenous food resources to improve diet quality and thereby improve nutrition.
- Symposium proceeding reflecting the outcomes and key recommendations discussed during the meeting with key messages, conclusions and recommendations.

Participation

Around 100-120 participants including senior officials from Governments, experts from the fields of agriculture, environment, health and nutrition, research and academic institutions, UN Agencies, private sector and indigenous people's organizations are expected to attend. Members of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences Task Force on Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems and Nutrition will also be invited to participate.

Date and Place

This two day meeting and one day field trip are scheduled to take place in 31 May – 2 June 2012. The event will be held in Khon Kaen, Thailand. The symposium will be followed by one day field trip on 2 June 2012 to traditional and indigenous farms in Khon Kaen areas.

Organizers

The event is jointly organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Khon Kaen University in Thailand and National Research Council of Thailand, and Japan International Research Center for Agricultural Sciences.