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COMMENT

Indigenous foods give a taste of healthier, 'better future'

They hold immense potential to enhance food security and dietary diversity

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CELEBRATED on October 16 each year, World Food Day's 2025 theme is "Hand in Hand for Better Foods and a Better Future".

As we mark this day, we should reflect on the important role of indigenous foods in shaping healthier, more sustainable diets. Indigenous foods are more than sustenance; they are vessels of cultural heritage, ecological wisdom, and nutritional resilience.

Rooted in ancestral knowledge and local ecosystems, these foods offer communities a sense of identity and continuity while addressing pressing global challenges such as malnutrition, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

Nutritionally, indigenous plant-based foods are rich in essential micronutrients like iron, zinc, and vitamin A, which are critical for improving health outcomes, as Thobeka Kunene and his co-authors point out in Food Security for African Smallholder Farmers (2022).

In a 2013 study published in the *International Journal of Engineering Research and Development*, Vignesh Janarthanan and Dinesh Kumar note that their natural bioactive compounds with antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, supports disease prevention and overall well-being.

Indigenous grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables also provide dietary fibre, resistant starch, and naturally occurring, health-boosting compounds, which aid in the regulation of blood glucose, how well your body responds to insulin, and weight management.

Despite their proven benefits, indigenous foods remain under-utilised due to market exclusion, erosion of traditional knowledge, and limited policy support.

Yet, they hold immense potential to enhance food security and dietary diversity, particularly in indigenous

communities across southern and East Africa.

Studies have shown that staples such as *thyke/thepe*, *nyawa/Imbumbha*, *muxiji*, *mabele*, *marula*, and *nsala/umKwakwa/klapper* exemplify this diversity and resilience.

Agriculturally, indigenous crops are well-adapted to local climates and require minimal inputs, making them ideal for smallholder farming systems. Their resistance to drought and their ability to survive and thrive despite environmental challenges position them as climate-smart solutions.

Research suggests that crops like sorghum, amaranth, and Bambara groundnuts can diversify food options and strengthen the resilience of households to climate shocks.

Promoting Indigenous foods also contributes to agroecological diversification and reduces dependence on import-driven food systems vulnerable to global disruptions. Integrating these crops into national climate adaptation strategies, land reform programmes, and public procurement systems, such as school and hospital meals, can create sustainable markets and support local economies.

Culturally, Indigenous foods are deeply embedded in storytelling, culinary traditions, and seasonal festivals. Scholars highlight that these practices foster intergenerational knowledge transfer, strengthen social cohesion, and instil pride in ancestral heritage.

Indigenous knowledge holders have long understood the healing and nourishing power of these foods, often passed down through oral tradition and lived experience.

Modern culinary innovation offers new opportunities to celebrate and elevate indigenous ingredients. Fusion cuisine, such as baobab-infused desserts, *marula* sauces, *teff* pancakes, and amaranth dumplings, can preserve heritage while appealing to contemporary palates. Chefs and food entrepreneurs play a vital role in this movement, using culinary storytelling to promote cultural preservation and broaden

consumer acceptance.

However, challenges remain in commercialisation, consumer awareness, and institutional recognition. Policy shifts are essential to integrate indigenous foods into formal food systems. Encouragingly, academic institutions, biodiversity conventions, and national dietary guidelines are beginning to acknowledge their value.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the African Union's Agenda 2063 support this momentum by profiling indigenous food systems, promoting their inclusion in national nutrition strategies, and advocating for policy reforms that protect and elevate them. The Lancet Planetary Health Diet further aligns with this vision, advocating for predominantly plant-based diets that are both nutritionally adequate and environmentally sustainable.

In South Africa, indigenous food production is being revitalised through community-led initiatives and institutional support. The Amadiba community in Mpondoland in the Eastern Cape, exemplifies this movement by preserving traditional agricultural practices such as seed saving, intercropping, and cultivating indigenous crops like pumpkin and cowpea.

Institutions like the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security and Stellenbosch University's Division of Human Nutrition are at the forefront of research and advocacy, highlighting the nutritional and ecological value of indigenous crops. These efforts are complemented by organisations such as African Marmalade, which supports smallholder farmers through seed banking and market development for crops like Bambara beans and sorghum.

Other institutions such as the Agricultural Research Council and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research lead research and innovation initiatives on the expansion, sustainable production and value chains of indigenous foods. Together, these grassroots and academic collaborations foster a

resilient, culturally rooted food system that addresses both climate challenges and nutritional needs for a better future.

On this World Food Day and beyond, let us commit to:

- Starting the process of renaming indigenous foods and educating both scientists and the public, as many common names of indigenous foods negatively impact how acceptable they are to people.

- Reclaiming indigenous knowledge by supporting community-led documentation and transmission of traditional food wisdom across generations.

- Reviving indigenous agriculture by advocating for policy inclusion, climate-resilient farming, and local procurement systems that prioritise indigenous crops.

- Aligning national and provincial plans by promoting local and indigenous production through inclusion in national interventions such as Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan, Nation Food and Nutrition Security Plan and the Comprehensive Producer Development Support.

- Reimagining culinary futures by encouraging chefs, educators, and entrepreneurs to innovate with indigenous ingredients and share their stories through food.

- Creating credible information hubs and information services and products on indigenous foods that are accessible to the public.

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