

# Crops for the future:

Paths out of Poverty

Global Facilitation Unit for  
Underutilized Species and  
International Centre for  
Underutilised Crops **join hands  
to promote underutilized crops**



# Crops for the future

A new global body, provisionally called 'Crops for the Future', will spearhead the drive to bring underutilized crops into the mainstream.



Underutilized crops are crops for the future. Around the world, species that are little used, or which were grown traditionally but have fallen into disuse, are being brought out of the shadows and put to use, especially in the hands of the poor. Over 7,000 plant species have been grown or collected for food. But worldwide, less than 150 have been commercialised and just three crops - maize, wheat and rice - supply half our daily proteins and calories.

Yet a large number of crops that are now overlooked have the potential to play a much more important role in sustaining livelihoods and enhancing environmental health.

## What are underutilized crops?

Words such as 'underutilized', 'neglected', 'orphan', 'minor', 'promising', 'niche' and 'traditional' are often used to describe the sorts of plant species that are grown, eaten or used very little, or very locally, but have great promise. A widely accepted definition of these crops is 'species with underexploited potential for contributing to food security, nutrition, health income generation, and environmental services'.

## Why bother about underutilized crops?

Placing too much reliance on just a handful of crops is risky. Crops fail, wars and strife wreak havoc on harvests and commodity prices oscillate. Climate change threatens to destabilize production. And, as the global population shoots up, the Green Revolution is reaching its limits in generating the ever-increasing amounts of food needed to feed it. Bringing underutilized crops out of the shadows into the mainstream spreads the risks. These crops usually thrive in infertile or difficult terrains that are not well suited to large-scale commercial agriculture. The poor are often the main inhabitants of such areas and underutilized crops give them alternative sources of income - paths out of poverty.



**Above, top:** Women and children will benefit most from increased use of underutilized species.

**Above:** The genetic diversity of star fruit and ber is only now beginning to be tapped and marketed.

**Right:** Many underutilized species are made into locally available refreshments.



# The vision

In the last couple of decades it has become abundantly clear that there is a great deal of interest - scattered around the globe - in these underutilized species. There's growing recognition that they diversify farming systems and, so, contribute to more secure livelihoods.

Two organisations, the Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species (GFU) and the International Centre for Underutilised Crops (ICUC), and many groups and individuals, have done much to stimulate and feed this interest. But, as the wave of interest builds, GFU and ICUC believe there is enormous value in creating a single global champion, 'Crops for the Future'.

## What 'Crops for the Future' will do

'Crops for the Future' will catalyse action on underutilized crops. One of its central tasks will be to lobby for favourable policy environments for underutilized and traditional crops in international and regional arenas. Another will be to vigorously promote communication and the exchange of information. Above all, 'Crops for the Future' will support and backstop research and development at national and local levels. 'Crops for the Future' will be a one-stop-shop about underutilized crops.

## What 'Crops for the Future' will look like

'Crops for the Future' will be a small, autonomous entity established in its own right and free to pursue its mission directed by its own oversight body.

## How 'Crops for the Future' will work

'Crops for the Future' will work to add value to existing efforts worldwide. To do this it will stimulate networks and forge strong partnerships with international and national organizations and individuals working to develop neglected and underutilized species.



Left: Underutilized species provide income to small-scale producers and entrepreneurs.

## The host of 'Crops for the Future'

'Crops for the Future' will be hosted by an appropriate international host institution. This will ensure 'Crops for the Future' is independent but captures programme synergies with its host.

## People will be its greatest asset

Staff who join 'Crops for the Future' will have great 'people skills' because, as well as being on the cutting edge of their disciplines, they will be working as a team - to communicate, network, build partnerships and inspire confidence and trust. Initially, the team will have expertise in agronomy, marketing and product development, policy, information management, socioeconomics and public awareness. The Chief Executive will lead fundraising and building the institution.

Although the full-time staff will be small, through innovative alliances, partnerships and flexible policies, other complementary expertise will be actively sought, for example consultants, secondments, honorary staff, retired professionals and research students.

“...neglected and underused plant species are part of a rich economic, social and cultural diversity, and many have the potential to play a much more important role than they do today in sustaining livelihoods and human wellbeing and in enhancing ecosystem health and stability.”



# Crops for the future

## A widely felt need

A widely felt need, especially among developing country research and development institutions, led to the creation of the International Centre for Underutilised Crops (ICUC) and, more recently, the Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species (GFU). From the very first, both institutions responded to extensive calls for help with underutilized crops. Clearly, they fill an important niche and a need that is likely to continue to exist for the foreseeable future.

GFU and ICUC promote and backstop efforts to realize the potential of underutilized species to help alleviate poverty and protect the environment. As well as hands-on research and development, they catalyse and facilitate partnerships, broker information and knowledge, and add value to the initiatives of others. But both institutions recognize that their activities could be rationalised, and that there are tremendous opportunities for building on their many complementarities.

### Joining hands for 'Crops for the Future'

As a first step, GFU and ICUC brought together a whole range of players to thrash out a global strategic framework for research and development on underutilized plants.

The overwhelming call for a single global champion for underutilized crops that emerged during the strategy dialogues impelled the two organisations to call a meeting to brainstorm options during the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research Annual General Meeting in December 2006. This was a major step in the way forward in creating a new global body for underutilized crops.

Both GFU and ICUC have made significant contributions to the development and promotion of neglected and underutilized plant species and have a long record of collaboration.

#### Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species (GFU)

The Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species (GFU) based in Rome, is a Global Partnership Programme of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research. GFU works to create the enabling conditions that will help stakeholders to develop underutilized species. The Unit's focus is on dealing with cross-cutting issues important to all stakeholders and underutilized species.

#### International Centre for Underutilised Crops (ICUC)

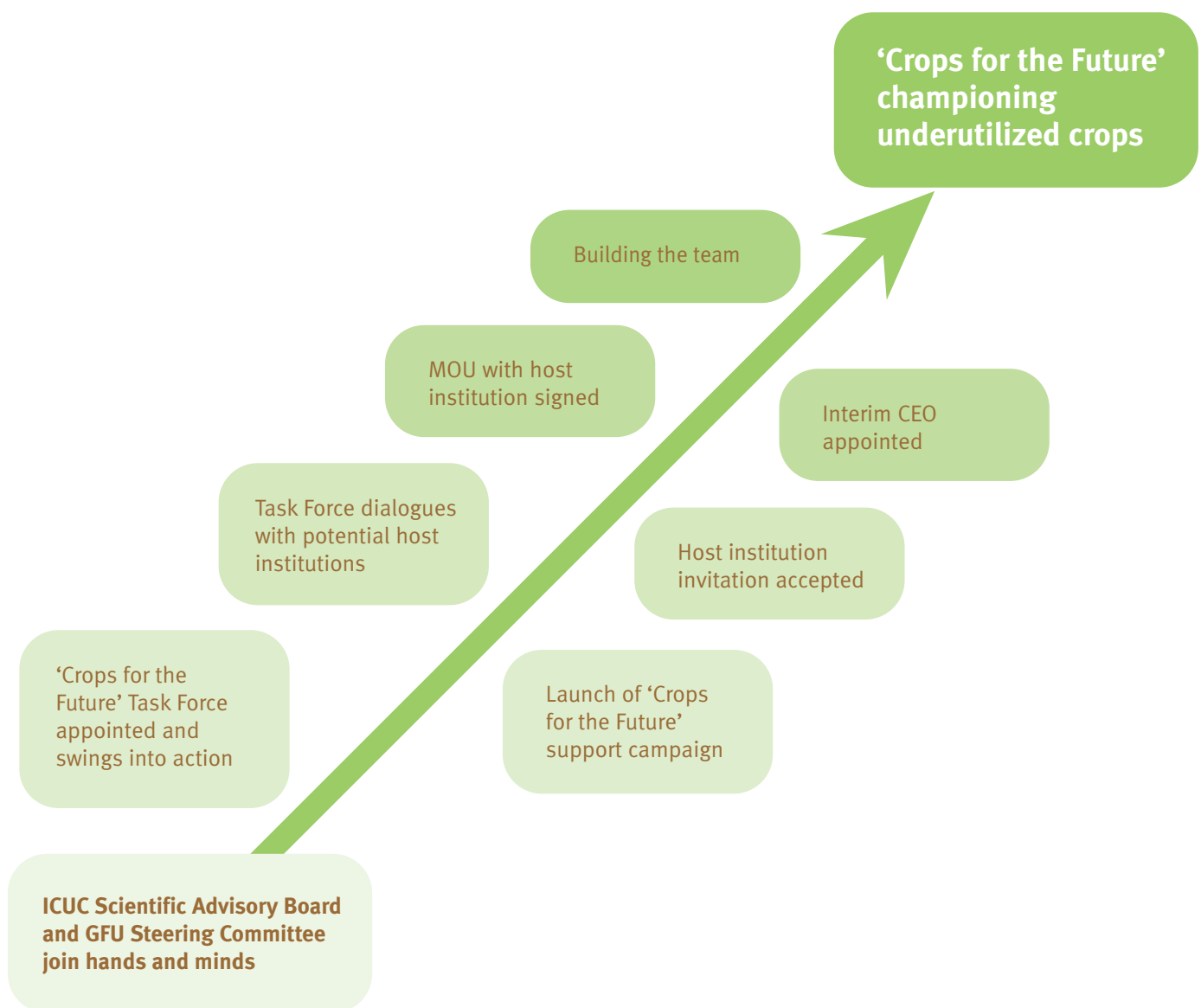
The International Centre for Underutilised Crops (ICUC) originated in the United Kingdom, and is now based in Sri Lanka. ICUC is deeply committed to supporting and backstopping research - often through ongoing Memoranda of Agreement - in national partner organizations. To a limited extent, ICUC itself also researches specific underutilized crop species. Though a very small centre, ICUC is particularly active in Asia and Africa and vigorously champions underutilized crops internationally.

“ There is a clear and on-going need for an international entity to help catalyse, backstop, promote and publicise work on underused crops for the benefit of the poor and the environment ”

# The way forward



Left: Cashew is a pan-tropical species of which often only the 'nut' is consumed. It has a huge potential for other uses too.



# Crops for the future

## Global priorities

Considerable thought and widespread consultation has already gone into formulating a global strategy for underutilized crops. 'Crops for the Future' will focus on five key areas of this strategy.

### Information and communication

**What:** Building on the foundations laid by GFU and ICUC, 'Crops for the Future' will serve as a knowledge broker, information clearing house and one-stop-shop for stakeholders seeking information.

**Why:** Stakeholders need reliable information about underutilized crops, help with marketing and pointers to links along the value chain through processors and the developers of new products, to markets and, eventually, consumers.

**How:** 'Crops for the Future' will fuel the exchange of information and two-way communication. To do this it will, for example, take part in regional and international consortia and networks, host electronic fora for building partnerships and alliances, promote the development of information services in local languages and maintain databases of marketing expertise.

### Market analysis and market research

**What:** 'Crops for the Future' will provide advice and backstopping on how markets operate and how to influence them, and how to access, use and maximize marketing opportunities.

**Why:** Processing and marketing is the key to many, if not most, efforts to expand the use of underutilized species. A better understanding of the importance of markets and how they operate is needed.

**How:** 'Crops for the Future' case studies will provide know-how on where and how to access local and international market information and provide links to relevant sources of information. Analysis of value chains will develop a better understanding of how markets for niche products such as underutilized species work.

**Right:** Indigenous vegetables are washed before marketing. The safe production of fruits and vegetables is a high priority for research and promotion.





Left: Vitamin deficiencies, especially in children under the age of five, can be ameliorated through higher consumption of locally available fresh fruits.

## Policy research

**What:** 'Crops for the Future' policy research, analysis and advocacy will focus on creating favourable environments for underutilized crops.

**Why:** A change in policy, at all levels, could help provide a more enabling environment for the production, processing, marketing and consumption of these species.

**How:** 'Crops for the Future' will analyse policies and, where necessary, advocate for change in policy arenas, actively engaging in policy dialogue. The major focus will be at the regional and international levels. At local and national levels 'Crops for the Future' will offer advice and assistance. Case studies will compile, synthesise and analyse the results of other studies to support advocacy.

## Public awareness

**What:** Public awareness campaigns to raise the profile of underutilized crops, particularly targeting policy and decision makers and donor agencies.

**Why:** A lack of awareness has often been cited as the major barrier to greater use of underutilized species. Creating a better understanding of the potential and contribution of underutilized and traditional crops for livelihoods and wellbeing will generate support and help create favourable policies.

**How:** 'Crops for the Future' will highlight the potential of underutilized species, concentrating on donors, and key policy and decision makers at the international level. But it will also advise and assist local or national efforts to raise awareness of specific crops or products. Case studies will be specifically geared to formulating best practices to underpin advocacy and fundraising.

## Capacity building

**What:** All 'Crops for the Future's' work will help build capacity in some way.

**Why:** Strengthening capacity in relevant sectors and at different levels of both civil society and government, such as in health, education or agriculture, and primary, secondary and tertiary education, will stimulate the use of underutilized crops.

**How:** Although 'Crops for the Future' will not aim to be a primary provider of education or training it will help develop training materials for areas such as sustainable and safe production, processing, marketing, entrepreneurship, quality control, meeting regulatory requirements and other important aspects of producing and marketing underutilized crops.

“ It is very much hoped that donor support will be forthcoming...Such an entity would have much to offer and could be decisive in the success of efforts worldwide to capitalize on the potential of so many underused crops and to promote their use in the fight against poverty and malnutrition and in the struggle to achieve a sustainable future. ”



**Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species**  
[www.underutilized-species.org](http://www.underutilized-species.org)



**International Centre for Underutilised Crops**  
[www.icuc-iwmi.org](http://www.icuc-iwmi.org)



Quotations are taken from Hawtin, Geoffrey. 2007. *Underutilized Plant Species Research and Development Activities - Review of issues and options*. A report submitted to the chairs of the GFU Steering Committee and the ICUC Scientific Advisory Board.

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