UNDER-UTILIZED CROPS CAN PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN FOOD AND LIVELIHOOD SECURITY FOR THE POOR

Colombo, Sri Lanka, March 16th 2006. “Underutilized or neglected crops are those plant species traditionally used for their food, fibre, fodder, oil or medicinal properties, but which have been overlooked by scientific research and development workers. These plants risk falling into disuse, yet they often play a crucial role in food security, income generation and the culture of the rural poor. They have a great potential to provide income to rural micro-entrepreneurs. Unfortunately the lack of attention has meant that their potential value is under-exploited, and they are in danger of continued genetic erosion, ultimately leading to disappearance,” says Dr. Hannah Jaenicke, Director of the International Centre for Underutilised Crops (ICUC), a hosted program of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), based in Colombo.

ICUC is a research, development and training organization. Together with its partner, the Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species (GFU) of the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute in Rome, Italy, ICUC has organized an expert consultation on underutilized plant species in the region. Experts from Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Vietnam have gathered today (16th March) in Colombo to discuss how to utilize neglected plant species to reduce hunger and poverty in Asia.

The experts will develop a strategic framework to facilitate collaboration between national and international players in the public and private sector by identifying opportunities and strengths and allowing partners to address priority issues. There is a need for a strategic framework because national and international institutions are increasingly looking at underutilized crops as a means of reducing poverty and malnutrition but activities are scattered and uncoordinated.

Says Dr Jaenicke, “There are around 7,000 plant species that are cultivated as ‘crops’ or used for timber, medicinal and ornamental purposes, but only 150 species are commercially used. While rice, maize and wheat remain popular staple foods, there are other grains in Asia like the ‘minor millets’: finger millet, Italian millet and little millet, that are a valuable source of nutrition. Other examples of underutilised crops are winged bean, jack fruit, soursop, mangosteen, woodapple, nelli, belifruit, tamarind, coriander, safflower, and various yams”. Research shows that 1 in every 5 people in the developing world is chronically undernourished and more than half of 12 million child deaths each year are related to malnutrition. Underutilized crops could provide alternative sources of nutrition for the poor.

Dhammika Perera is a Sri Lankan who currently earns Rs. 50,000 a month from his fruit processing enterprise “Tarindu Fruit Products”. Dhammika’s new business started after he attended an ICUC training course on processing and marketing of underutilized crops in 2004. He now employs 10 staff to supply the demand for his products. Because Dhammika’s business has increased the demand for fresh beli, wood apple and soursop, local producers have increased their household income too. Dhammika is one of over 2,000 dynamic entrepreneurs from the region who received training from ICUC through a
DFID-funded Forestry Research Program on “Processing and Marketing of Underutilised Fruits in Asia”.

In Sri Lanka, ICUC is working with the Council for Agricultural Research Policy (CARP), the University of Peradeniya, Practical Action, Industrial Technology Institute, the Horticultural Research and Development Institute (HORDI) of the Department of Agriculture and the Asian Centre for Underutilised Crops (ACUC), a regional centre of ICUC. The consultation is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through GTZ, the German Technical Cooperation Agency.

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Background Information:

About The International Centre for Underutilised Crops

The ICUC is a research, development and training organization. It provides expertise and acts as a knowledge hub for tropical, sub-tropical and temperate plant development. Since its inception, ICUC has supported research on national priorities for germplasm collections, agronomy and post harvest methodology of underutilized species and associated scientific conferences and training events. In recent years, the focus has expanded to include processing and marketing assessments and training to local people. Monographs, extension manuals and popular posters have been produced in local languages and distributed widely. ICUC has developed its projects in close collaboration with national and regional research and enterprise development organizations in 21 countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa. It has been instrumental in the founding of several professional networks, in particular UTFANET (Underutilised Tropical Fruits in Asia Network), UTVAPNET (Underutilised Tropical Vegetables for Asia and the Pacific Network), SEANUC (Southern and East Africa Network for Underutilised Crops) and ACUC (Asian Centre for Underutilised Crops).

Website: www.icuc-imwi.org

About The Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species

The GFU is a multi-institutional initiative that acts globally to promote a wider use of underutilized plant species through supporting and facilitating the work of other stakeholders. Partners work on different aspects and at different levels, and the GFU aims to strengthen these actors and to mainstream the theme in international and national research and development agendas. Having these aims in mind, the GFU is not promoting particular underutilized species and is not involved in the implementation of projects of national partners. Its mission is rather to create an enabling environment for stakeholders who are engaged in developing underutilized species.

Website: www.underutilized-species.org