

Seed Revolution: Creating a Seed Bank of Indigenous Food Crops in a Rural African Village of Dewe (*Uganda*)

By Sam Mukumba



The aim of this idea is to promote and conserve African indigenous food crops through creating a seed bank and educational centre. It is a great contribution in addressing the global food security and environmental degradation. Not long ago every African family grew their own food. Subsistence farming was suitable and sustainable. Crop rotation was part of the game. They had a good connection to the land and relationship with nature. Indigenous people did not need university degrees to survive. People had the knowledge and confidence in working the land. They understood how to work with seasons. They grew and tended plants they were familiar with. They were knowledgeable about insects and diseases that affected their crops. Some used to keep animals such as cows and goats whose dung was used to improve soil and create humus. They had trust in the plants which they grew and they were aware of their nutritional and medicinal and ecological values. Those who lived as nomads depended on wild meat, vegetables, fruits, grains, root tubers and nuts and their animal products. People migrated following rain searching for greener pastures. This type of life is becoming impossible and dying out because of the partition of Africa and current politics and colonial land ownership system. We now experience the modern exodus of involuntary international migration

In recent years, the market is dictating what people must grow most of which comes packaged with a high price tag on. This has poisoned people's attitudes towards the non-marketable crops. Unfortunately, most of the people in Africa do not have money to purchase these seeds/plants and required skills to grow these internationally recognised and commercially demanded crops. People have to depend on the agricultural officer's advice, seeds and other supplies. Some supplies are hybrids or genetically modified seeds. People's freedom and power to manage their lives and sustainable food production is in danger. Indigenous cultivated grains, vegetables, fruits, root tubers, nuts, legumes etc which are great sources of proteins, minerals, vitamins carotene amino acids etc are neglected and at times lead into extinction.

I come from a farming family in Uganda and I remember very well how my mother used to put a palm full of dried seeds in her mouth and spat them out as she sow into the ground. These were seeds she had harvested in the previous years and stored in gourds. My family always had gourds full of different types of seeds. The sad thing is this idea of saving seeds has becoming an old and unvalued tradition. There now shops selling packaged seeds. Most of the time these seeds are hybrids or genetically modified usually coated with pesticide. I have seen maize seeds covered up in green pesticide. Yes it important to protect seeds from pests and insects but one factor we have not looked at is the indigenous people who still use the above mentioned techniques of sowing seeds. They cannot read instructions and they are not informed about the effects of putting these protected seeds in their mouth before sowing. Many people in Africa are dying of unidentified diseases and these are some of the causes.

Many food organisations donate hybrid/exotic seeds to deprived Africans with the idea of improving food production instead of supporting them in what they know better and providing them with incentives to increase the production of indigenous crops. These crops are suitable to the climate and more resistant to tropical diseases and insects. A big population of Africa is faced with malnutrition and under consumption causing many diseases and immune deficiency. People are increasingly becoming more dependants on fertilizers, weed killers, imported hybrid seeds and pesticides none of which is sustainable and good for the environment. These are all controlled by big companies and government organisations whose major intention is commercial gains rather than human survival. When this fails they die of starvation if not given processed, tinned and packaged Food Aid full of preservatives. This is all short term. It does not answer the causes of our poverty and starvation problem. The idea of intercropping, which diversify the diet and helps to enrich the vegetation cover and allows us to live with pests ecologically this is now substituted with modern, commercial and extensive mono-cropping which aims at



ensuring high yields of cash crops and gradually lowers the natural fertility of the soil.

People used to rely on forests to provide edible nut, oil nuts and fruits. During the colonial time and post-independence cash cropping was introduced to supply raw materials for the Western Industrial revolution. It was not able to rely on the Europe and American production of these materials any more after the abolition of slave trade. This resulted into cutting down of the rainforests for farming. Logging of hard wood timber for ship, railway line and other constructions in the West became a daily activity. This is continuously affecting the poor peoples' lives that have to depend on wild foods. It is also causing soil erosion, desertification, and loss of indigenous trees and contributing to global warming. Sahara and Kalahari Desert are expanding rapidly. Rivers, wetlands are drying up and lakes are shrinking. A good example is Lake Victoria

Creating an African seed bank involves researching, collecting seeds, and recording and practically cultivating African indigenous food crops mainly from the equatorial region. After each harvest we create a reservoir where other people can collect and exchange seeds for different purposes. With this idea, the degree of famine and dependency on food aid will be reduced. People will start to appreciate and care for these neglected crops.

I am aware that since the 1850s many exotic food crops were introduced into the continent from other parts of the world. These included cassava, potatoes, bananas plantains most of which are adopted and fitted to the tropical environment easily and added variety to our food culture. What we should not ignore is that there were indigenous crops such as yam, sorghum, millet, maize etc which we need to pay attention to otherwise they will go into extinction the way working the land is done in this modern age. There still traditional stories and songs talking about these plants. With determination and taking responsibility of our environment we can start to nurture these plants.

Historically Uganda is well known for its agriculture all of which happens in villages. Every family/com-

munity used to have granaries. These are now looked at as historical monuments. Recently a good number of people mostly the youth are deserting the villages moving to towns and Kampala city looking for jobs and ways to survive. Unfortunately there are not enough jobs to support all these people and the crime rate is increasing. In Karamoja which is in the Northern part of Uganda, People are kidnapping children as young as four years old, put them on a bus to Kampala and place them on street to beg. These Children spend their day sitting in one place with their hands rose constantly begging. They are highly humiliated and exploited, their childhood stolen from them. Even when you give them food they cannot look at you in the face. This is really and it is happening as I write this article. Some parents are also happy to send their children off because they do not have the possibilities of looking after them. People can live without education, but they cannot live without food. The situation is depressing. There is a great need to recognise and support the indigenous way of living. ■

We invite groups or individual volunteers to offer knowledge and skills in biodynamic and organic farming to the local farmers for either a short period or a year. We offer board and lodging but also encourage volunteers to do some fundraising for the project if they can.

If you are interested please contact Sam Mukumba on **mukumba8@googlemail.com**
Dewe Project website: **www.deweschoolofart.com**

