

In 2011, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) published a booklet titled “ [why Africa has become a net food importer](#) ?”. The publication argued that Africa started to grow its food deficit since the mid-1970s, despite its vast agricultural potential, due to a combination of factors such as: population growth, low and stagnating agricultural productivity, policy distortions, weak institutions and poor infrastructure. The booklet also noted that the wealthier countries in Africa are those with the highest food imports per capita (USD 185 per year in real terms), while Africa’s low-income countries, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa, import far less food per capita (USD 17 per year), but have higher difficulties in covering their food imports bills, as the reserves of hard currency derived from exports are minimal, and insufficient to cover the costs of such imports.

So, how a continent that is paradoxically reliant on imported food and home to a disproportionate share of the world’s hungry can hope to become in future the breadbasket of the world as [many observers](#) argue?

FAO, in partnership with the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), a continental research forum, tries to answer to this question by launching a publication which lists the underutilized crops that have the potential to provide dietary nutrients to various African communities. These include traditional local mainstays such as bambara groundnut and pigeons peas, superfoods such as fonio or baobab fruit, and naturalized vitamin-rich crops such as amaranth or taro.

Titled “ [Compendium of forgotten foods in Africa](#) ”, the publication aims at identifying 100 examples of neglected local foods that have the potential to sustainably provide the much-needed dietary nutrients to various communities across Africa and for transforming African agrifood systems to be more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable. Sometimes, such foods are consumed exclusively in local markets (like cassava or bush mango) and their potential for longer-distance trade (within the continent) or for export to foreign market is totally unexplored, also due to the fact that they have received so far little or no policy and research attention, especially for what concerns their genetic improvement and value chain development, so gaining the appellation of “orphan foods”.

This publication constitutes “food for thought” on the need for the continent to invest in the

cultivation of endogenous products and to increase their market visibility, so to reach out larger consumer bases and expand its agricultural potential, not only to fill the continent's food deficit, but also to increase the export of these products to extra-continental markets, so to accelerate the economic growth of Africa.